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—
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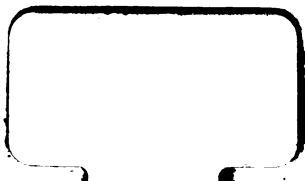
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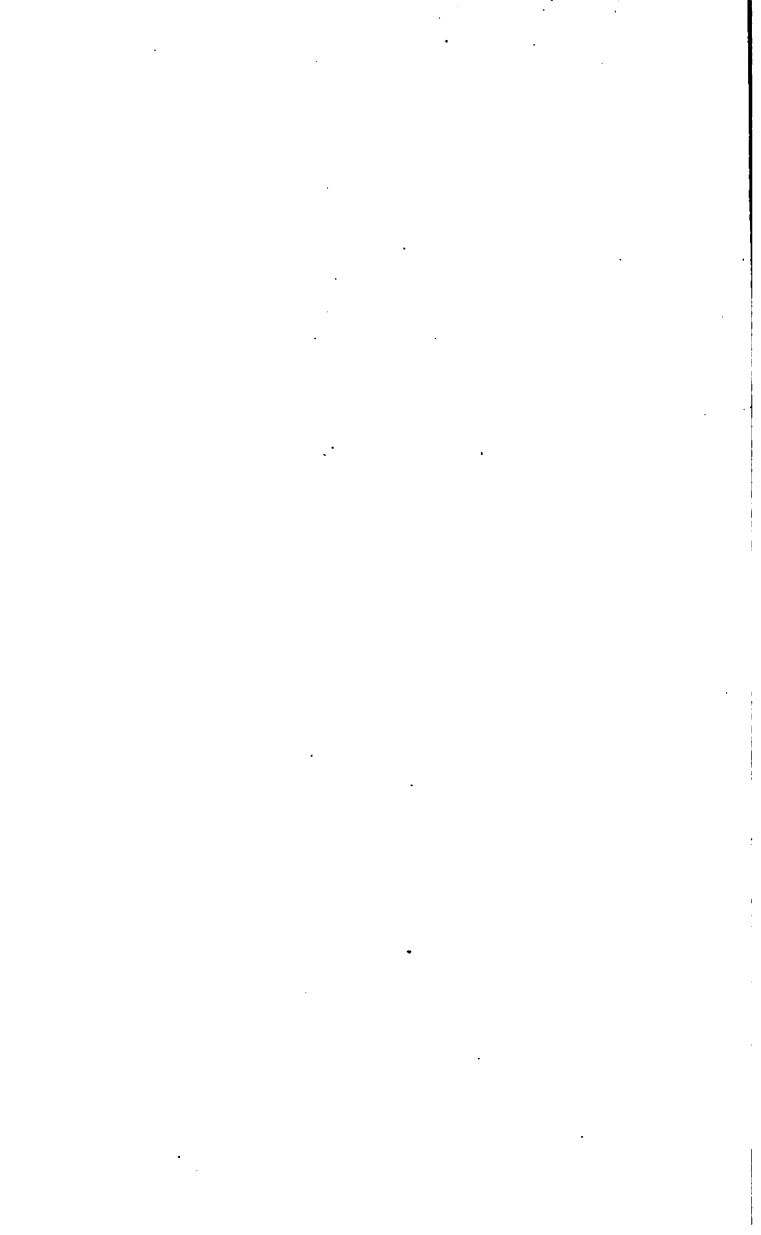
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How a Modern Atheist Found God

BY

G. A. FERGUSON



BOSTON
AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
1912

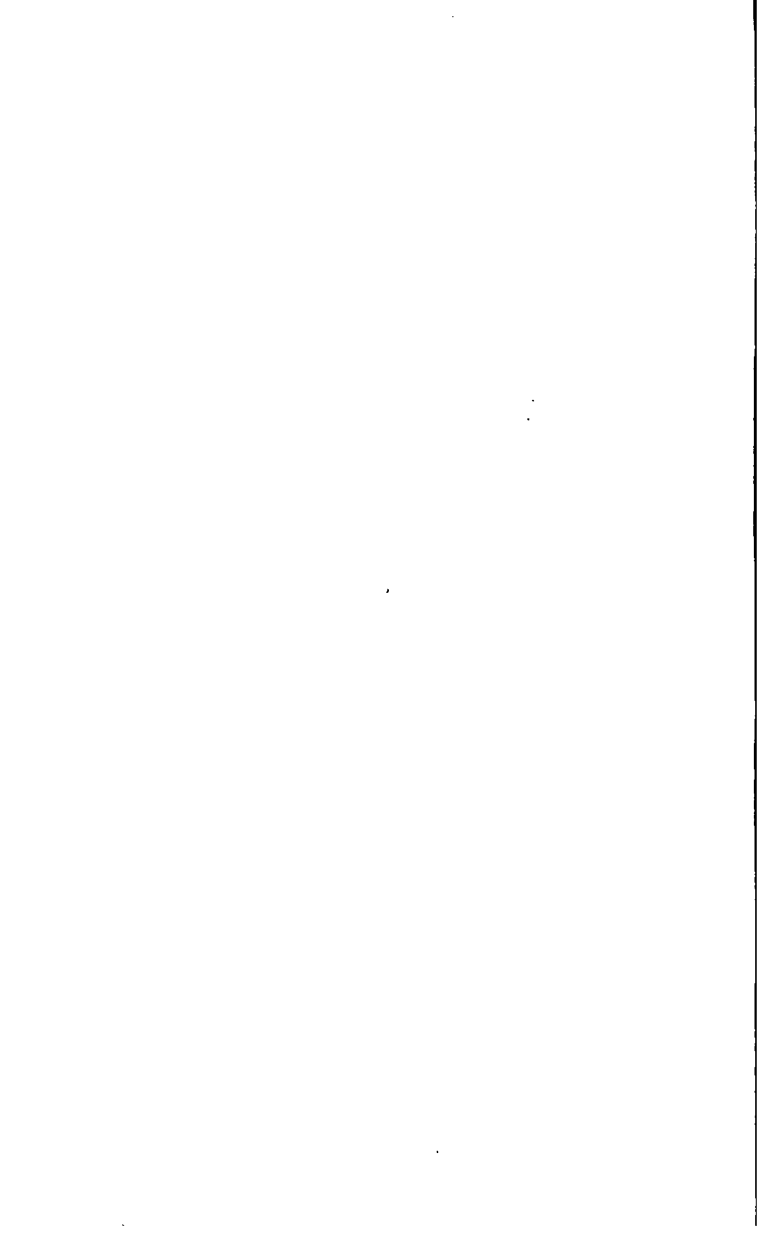
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TO
MY MOTHER,
AT WHOSE KNEE
I FIRST LEARNED TO LOVE
TRUTH AND RELIGION



PREFACE

IN the following pages the author has tried to give a true and faithful account of his own actual experience. When Science and Historical Criticism are making such inroads on the old orthodox forms of belief, there will, doubtless, be many who, to the First Part of the book, can furnish a more or less similar experience of their own.

But it is the Second Part that is really significant, for it describes the way in which a Positive Atheist, step by step, and by Reason alone, was compelled to abandon that position for a glorious unshakable Faith in the Infinite Truth, Love, and Goodness of God.

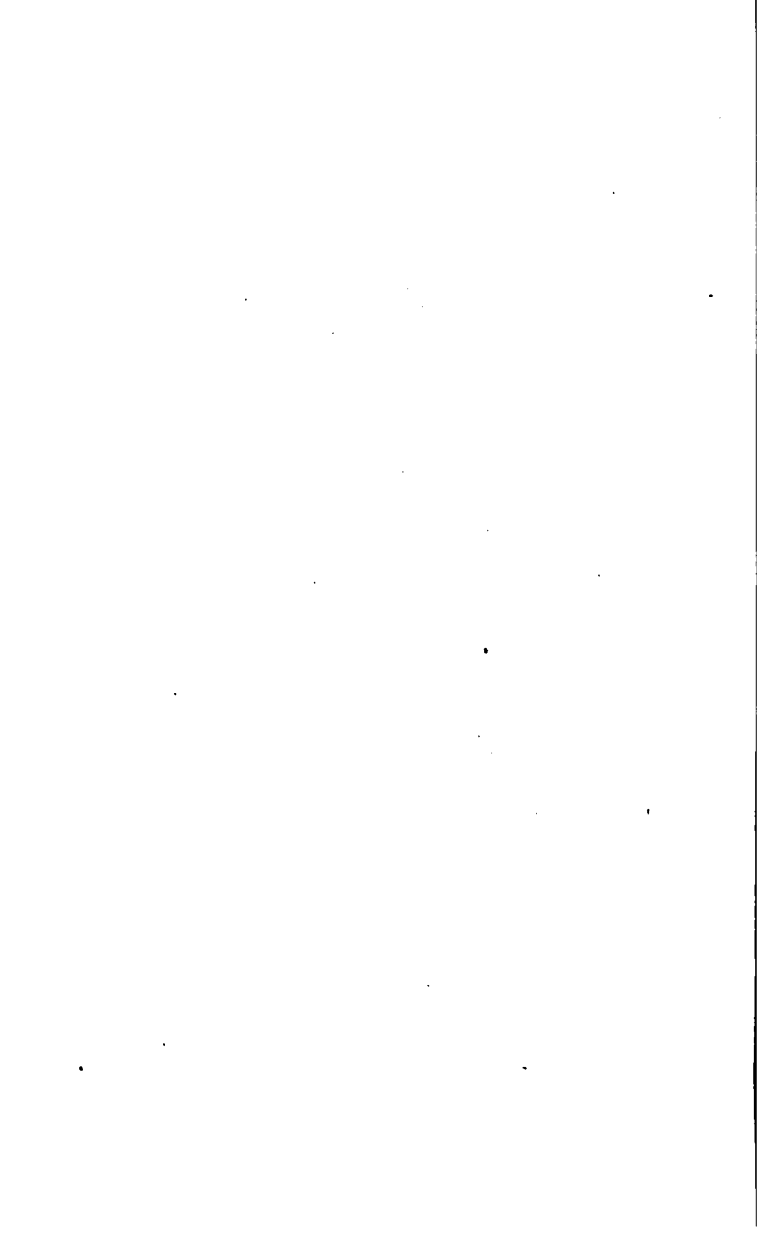
The author desires to assist others who may be also seeking the Light. Controversy is often barren of results ; so he has considered that the best way is simply to give his own experience. The problems which he has had to solve, and the difficulties he has had to overcome, must be the very same as are perplexing so many seekers after Truth at the present time.

To most people, too, a story is more interesting than a mere discussion ; and, though there is plenty of argument here, it all leads up, and is quite indispensable, to the happy termination.

It has been suggested that this little book is incomplete because it does not deal with the Problem of Evil, the Destiny of Man, and other perplexing themes. But a complete solution of these questions did not enter into the story of my pilgrimage. I had found God *in my highest* ; and I have never doubted for an instant that, in the highest conception of God, all these problems can be finally solved.

G. A. F.

March, 1912.



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INTRODUCTION

RELIGION at present is under a cloud. It seems to be the last thing that the world really thinks or cares about. It is true that we still have all the external agencies and paraphernalia of Religion ; but the general scepticism and unbelief of the age is taking all the life out of them, and making them count for less and less in the great social and intellectual movements of the day. The dwindling congregations, the frantic efforts to raise money for church purposes by means of bazaars and secular entertainments, the rush to the country or the seaside at week-ends, the increasing love of pleasure all tell the same significant tale. The modern civilized world is living with scarcely any consciousness of God or things Divine.

Even in the Churches themselves Faith is weak and halting. Through sheer force of habit thousands of men and women continue

to repeat the same formulas and attend the same ceremonies as they did in their early years, and they insist on their children doing the same ; but all real belief in them is a thing of the past. Ask the man in the street—not in the pew—what he actually and truly believes about God, Providence, the Supreme Purpose of Life, and a Future State of Existence, and he will only look at you in blank surprise. In the church he will mechanically repeat the dogmas of his special creed and denomination : outside of it to him all these Highest Things have no practical meaning ; they belong to a system of thought which he no longer understands.

In short, Agnosticism, secret or openly avowed, represents the real attitude towards religion of the great majority of those who have broken free from the shackles of authority, and are resolved to think for themselves. In face of such an outlook, many seek refuge in the Church of Rome. Believing that reason leads to the destruction of their most cherished hopes and consolations, they prefer to flout her altogether, and to accept their faith from the most venerable authority that the world can produce. But such a state of mind can

never permanently satisfy the awakened intellect and vigorous mental activity of modern times. Reason refuses to be crushed under foot. If creeds and dogmas are opposed to reason, then so much the worse for them. A few follow reason and truth whithersoever they may lead, and seek a form of faith more in harmony with the knowledge and science of the present age. Hence we have Liberal Christianity, the New Theology, Unitarianism, as well as Modernism in the Roman Catholic Church itself. And yet, notwithstanding this marked progress in religious thought and the new enlightened doctrines that are now being everywhere proclaimed from the pulpit, the tendency of the age to indifference and neglect of religion is not checked ; the devotion to money and pleasure is ever on the increase ; and it would seem to be merely a question of time, how soon the belief in God and the reality of the soul will be as extinct as the worship of Woden and Thor.

The moral enthusiasm of the race is now turned towards Socialism and the amelioration of the condition of the people. It is not the thought of God, but sympathy with man, that is the main stimulus to political

and social reform. God is altogether ignored or he is regarded but as a vague impersonal Power, a stream of tendency 'that makes for righteousness.' With very few exceptions, the Socialism of to-day is entirely agnostic; it leaves the unseen world severely alone. It, indeed, often talks of promoting the kingdom of God on earth, but it totally deserts the House of God for the market-place and the lecture-room. How many ministers with 'advanced views' in religion have started preaching Socialism to their hearers, only to find that their congregations soon began to melt away. The truth is, that the views of these ministers themselves are so nearly akin to Agnosticism, that no ordinary person can tell the difference. In hymn and prayer the language of devotion still addresses a personal Being, who is our Father in heaven; but there is nothing in the sermon or discourse by the minister, nothing in the behaviour and conversation of the members of his church, to suggest that God is, indeed, a God that 'heareth prayer,' or is, in any way, interested or concerned in the lives of his worshippers.

I believe that I do not exaggerate when I say that the so-called advanced churches of

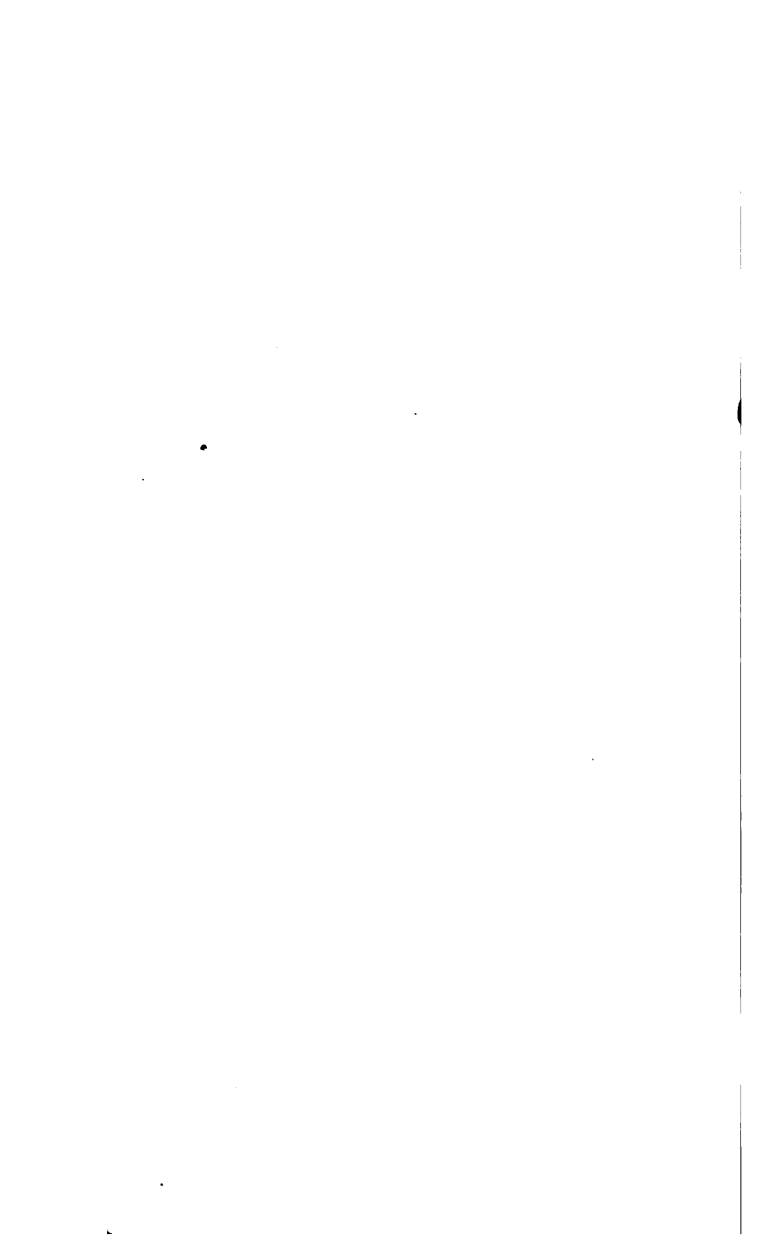
our land are honeycombed with Agnosticism. Channing, of course, is quite old-fashioned ; Parker is now far behind the times ; and even Martineau is out-of-date. I have known a church where a letter from the great ' Saint of Theism ' was carefully preserved in a frame, but where his ethical philosophy was classed amongst ' exploded notions.' A vague, misty, incoherent Pantheism, or the worship of the moral ideal, is now being substituted for the adoration of the heavenly Father, and, not long ago, one minister in Yorkshire actually expunged the name of God from all the prayers used in his church.

Whither is religion tending, when such avowed Agnosticism has found a place in the very churches themselves ? Surely, we have reached a crisis in the religious evolution of the race, compared with which all former revolutions and reformations are as nothing. The struggle is for the very existence of religion itself. The issue lies between declared and open Agnosticism and the highest form of Christian Theism or Pantheism. Has the Almighty God any concern with us, or no ? Does he at all care for us, or no ? Has he any purpose for us here and hereafter, or no ? These are the crucial

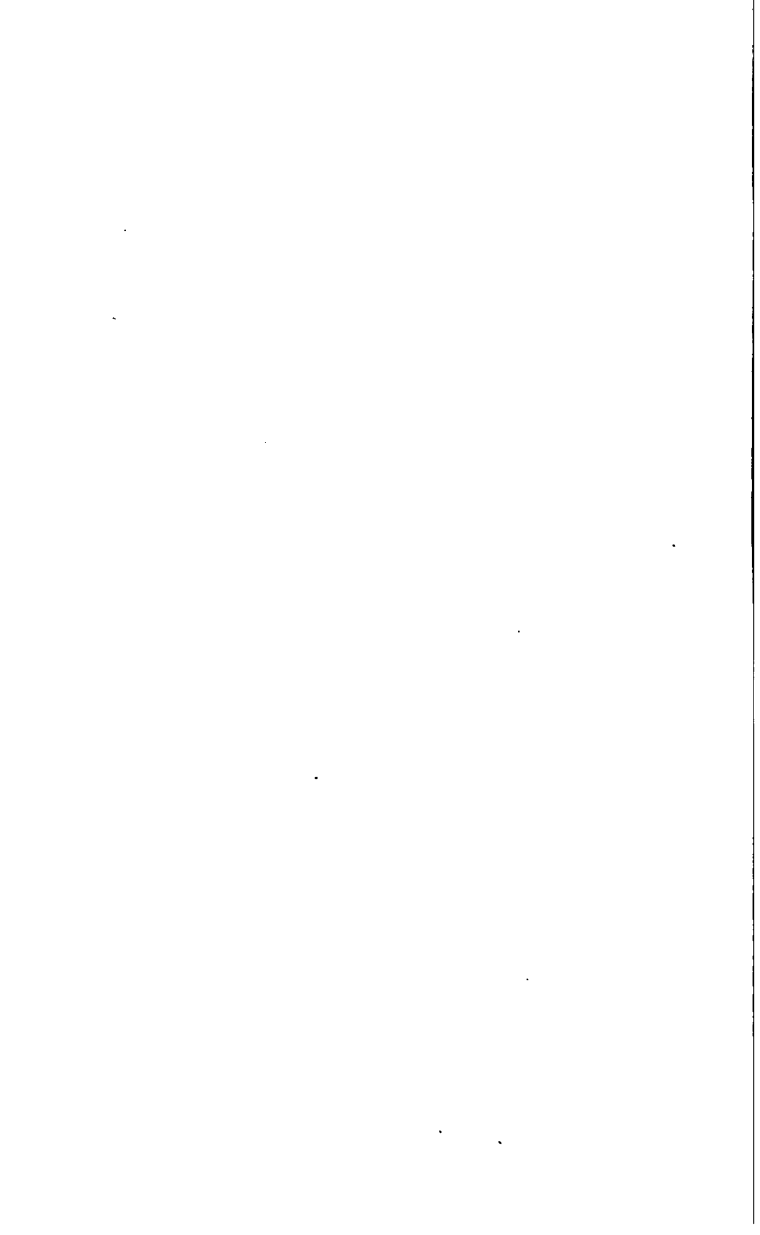
questions that go to the very foundations of religion, and are agitating all thoughtful minds to-day. Humanity demands an answer. Where can we find it save in the conflict of opinion and the clash of argument ?

But controversy often seems to produce so little effect ; and I am emboldened by my own almost unique experience to try another method. I will not reason or argue against others : I will only relate what actually happened to myself. If my story should take the form of argument, it will merely describe the collision of ideas and opinions in my own mind. I have had the good fortune to have been brought up in the strictest orthodox Christian faith, to have been gradually driven from it to positive Atheism, and, finally, to have been compelled to abandon Atheism and Agnosticism for an unshakable belief in the infinite love and goodness of God ! It is the latter transition which is really significant. I have not yet met anyone else who, from being a confirmed and convinced unbeliever, was forced by reason alone to cross over to the other side and accept the truth of the highest religion with his whole mind and soul. The great value of such an unusual

experience is, that it enables me to judge either side of the great controversy with absolute fairness and impartiality. I, indeed, know what Atheism and Agnosticism mean, for I myself have been a most thorough and determined Atheist and Agnostic, never dreaming that I should ever be anything else. I know what true religion is, for, from that day nineteen years ago when the light burst upon me with such dazzling splendour, I have never had a moment's doubt of the Infinite love and goodness of the Most High. My earnest desire is to help to lead others in the same way; and, for the sake of all who may be seeking the truth in religion, I willingly lay bare the inmost history of my soul during its long years of struggle through darkness into light.



PART I
FROM ORTHODOXY TO ATHEISM



CHAPTER I

EARLY RELIGIOUS TRAINING

FEW boys, I believe, could have had a better religious training than that which was given to me in my earliest years. My father, who was the founder of the Christian Church at Chamba, my birthplace, among the Himalayas, was a very broad-minded clergyman of the Church of Scotland. My mother is herself the daughter and granddaughter of missionaries who did noble work for the London Missionary Society in India.

I well remember the fascinating Bible lessons which my brother and I used to receive on Sunday afternoons at our mother's knee. It was one of those big old family Bibles, crammed full of the most interesting and exciting pictures. Adam and Eve, Noah building his Ark, Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Joseph in the pit, Moses smiting the

rock, Jonah tossed into the sea, Daniel in the den of lions, all the heroes and chief incidents of Old and New Testament history were vividly represented to our wondering eyes, and the Bible stories impressed firmly on our minds. It was all a real world to us, a kind of Fairyland, in which, however, everything was altogether true. We were so well taught in Bible knowledge at home, that we easily surpassed our companions in the Scripture lessons at school. In one of my first written examinations on the subject I remember losing only half a mark out of the hundred by getting mixed up in the number of l's in 'Galilee.' I remember, too, when I was nine, telling a girl in Shetland, where we were spending a holiday, that I liked the Book of Acts best of all in the Bible. She said that she preferred the bits about King David. I suppose it must have been the missionary interest in Acts that so impressed a descendant of missionaries. I would be a missionary too. Even in India, my dear old Hindu ayah or nurse used to call me the Padre Sahib, like my father, and my brother the Doctor Sahib, like my Uncle John.

But we did more than merely learn the

Bible stories ; we were taught to think about what we had learned. In view of the years of religious doubts and questionings which were to be my lot in life, I was much interested in what my mother once told me, that, when I was about seven, I looked up into her face one day after our Bible lesson, and said, 'Mamma, isn't it the difficultest thing of all to know who made God ?'

Our parents did not send us to Sunday school ; but, one Sunday afternoon, my brother and I went to the school in my father's church at Dumbiedykes, in Edinburgh. It was only a little iron building then. All that I can recollect of our experiences on that occasion is, that we seemed to be the only boys who could answer a single question, and that the other scholars bombarded us most unmercifully with peas. It gave me a strong distaste for Sunday schools for many a year afterwards.

At home, in addition to the Bible lesson, we had to learn, very rarely, a hymn or psalm by heart—the twenty-third Psalm, of course ; but the only hymn I can at present remember having to learn was 'For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies.' A still earlier recollection is the strange sound

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of the word 'sim-ple-ci-ty' to me, in one of the lines of a well-known child's hymn, which I had to learn without the remotest idea of its meaning. But my parents did not often make that kind of mistake. It was only at a private day-school that I had to learn the Westminster Shorter Catechism, luckily for me, without the Proofs. My Aunt Mary, an angel on earth if there ever was one, has told me that at the village school she could manage to master the actual answers in the Catechism, but the Proof-texts were often too much for her, and down would come the 'palmies' on her innocent hand. Religious training with a vengeance.

My father had more common sense ; and our lessons in religion were never made painful to us. Instead of burdensome memorizing, we used to have family hymn-singing on Sunday evenings. How we did enjoy that. It was the old Moody and Sankey book with the well-known favourites 'Hold the fort,' 'Pull for the shore, sailor,' 'In the sweet bye and bye,' 'Dare to be a Daniel.' Though I have not heard them sung for many years, the old tunes are as fresh as ever in my mind. They formed a

most important part in training the religious emotions.

I have said that my father was a broad-minded man ; and, though I was brought up in the strictest orthodoxy, I was never troubled by threats of hell-fire if I was naughty. God was always represented to us as being perfectly good. Of course, we were told that there was a place of future punishment for the wicked as there was an abode of future bliss for those who did right and lived well. No death in our home ever brought such matters near to ourselves. I cannot say that, at that time, I had any love for God—which is not very strange. I was too much in awe and fear of my earthly father to have any interest in a heavenly one. Nor do I remember, as a boy, feeling any special affection for Jesus Christ. Needless to say, I did not puzzle my brains over the mystery of the Trinity. I was told that Jesus was also God ; and that was enough. I understood that the Bible said that he was ; and of course, as every single word in the Bible was true—which I never doubted for an instant—that settled the matter. But I do not remember being attracted even by the man Christ Jesus. His miracles were

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interesting ; but they took him away from me by making him something I could not grasp. The missionary Paul was my great Bible hero ; but Jesus Christ ? The best orthodox training in the world could not inspire me with any genuine love for an absolutely sinless, superhuman, miraculous being, who was a kind of mixture of God and man. I looked up to Christ with awe and reverence and perfect faith in all that he was declared to have said and done. The dogmas of theology did not trouble a boy under fourteen. The hymns that we sang called Jesus 'our Saviour' ; therefore, he must be so. But Saviour from what or how, it never enters the head of a child to inquire. That he was very, very good, and we must all try to be like him, was sufficient guidance for our youthful minds.

As children we were, of course, taught to pray, generally in words that were prescribed for us ; and I did believe that God always heard our prayers, and would answer them. I can still remember my first spontaneous prayer. When a child of seven, I once lost a lead-pencil. In vain I searched for it. In my distress and fear of a scolding, I said, 'Please, God, help me to find my

pencil'; and I found it in the curtains of the drawing-room. On another occasion, several years later, in the excitement at the prospect of winning a scholarship at George Watson's College in Edinburgh, the school which my brother and I attended, I ran home and, flinging myself on my knees, prayed to God to let me get the scholarship. I was successful. Of course, I was far too young to reason on the subject of prayer, whether it was illogical or otherwise. I only mention these instances to show how real was my faith in what I had been taught about God.

I cannot recollect at what age I really began to listen to sermons in church; but, just before I reached my twelfth birthday, I was strongly impressed by a New Year sermon on the text 'Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.' The preacher was the gentleman at whose house my brother and I were going to live when our parents went abroad. My father was appointed Presbyterian Colonial Chaplain in the island of Cyprus; and just when we were beginning to properly appreciate the blessings of home and home life, we were left among strangers in Edinburgh. It seemed a heavy loss to us; and I have often wondered how my religious

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experiences would have turned out had I remained with my parents. But we were at an excellent school, and the development of our minds was bound to continue.

I was always a lover of reading, especially history. Since I was ten, when the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 roused such tremendous interest in this country, I have studied contemporary history in the daily newspaper. I very early read ancient Greek and Roman history; but the first good historical work that I devoured was Motley's 'Rise of the Dutch Republic,' a book I had won as a prize for Latin at school. It was here, quite as much as in Bible and Catechism, that I was receiving my religious training. My mother used to read aloud to us in the evenings some book like 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' or 'The Scottish Chiefs'; and there was constantly being set before our minds noble ideals of conduct and character. We were taught to appreciate the true, the beautiful, the good. The gift of Charles Kingsley's 'The Heroes' from my aunt in London, the fairy god-mother of our childhood's days, led me to take the warmest interest in Greece and everything Greek. At school I was fondest

of the Classics ; and my love of history was so great, that I remember once trying to read a Spanish history surreptitiously under the desk. I do not know how I managed to escape the cane or rather 'tawse' for the offence.

It must always be difficult to tell when a child first begins to take a serious and earnest view of life. I remember, in the autumn before my father went to Cyprus, once saying to myself, 'Now, I must really try to be good and do what is right.' I cannot recall any of the circumstances of the case ; but that is the earliest 'good resolution' I can recollect having made. Soon afterwards came the New Year sermon spoken of above, and my mind and character got their bent in the right direction. Even as a boy, I could never understand frivolous and thoughtless people. My parents did not press me at all as to what calling I wished to choose in life, and really I troubled very little about the matter. It was enough that I did my work at school as well as I could. I was a 'duffer' at mathematics from the time when I was not properly instructed in the rule of three ; but I liked all my other studies, even grammar, which is usually

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considered as dry and uninteresting. I may have had some vague thoughts of being a missionary or minister, like my father.

When I was about thirteen, I did not like the Prayer Book used in the church in Edinburgh which my brother and I had to attend, and I made a great deal of unnecessary fuss over it. Whether it was the thought of Jenny Geddes and her stool, I cannot remember, but it shows that I was specially interested, even then, in religious matters. My father used occasionally to refer to such things in his letters from Cyprus. One, which I received on Christmas Day, 1880, urging me to declare myself for Christ, naturally made a strong impression on my mind; it would not let me rest. I felt that it had to be answered in a satisfactory manner. It brought about what my family at first joyfully regarded as my conversion. It is now more than thirty years ago, and I cannot quite recall the exact steps that led up to it. What I remember is this:—I had a particular school friend, John R.— who was a few months younger than myself, and, even at thirteen, had read serious books. R— was of a sceptical turn of mind, and we often used to discuss questions of religion

together. I had just turned fourteen, and one evening, soon after the receipt of my father's letter, I persuaded my friend to accept the truth of Christianity and a belief in God. I was so overjoyed at this that I at once wrote to my father, telling him what I had managed to do, and also declaring that I now took Jesus Christ as my Saviour, and that I was resolved henceforth to serve him with my whole heart. Whatever else my letter contained—and it did not contain any reference to conviction of sin—it was the first open pronouncement of my resolution to live for God, and to make the doing of his will my supreme aim in life. I had, at last, overcome my shyness to speak of the inmost purposes of my heart. Needless to say, my father received my letter with tears of joy. He spread the good news of my conversion throughout the family generally; and, some months afterwards, my Uncle John told me how rejoiced he had been to hear that I had openly taken my stand for Christ and God.

I was very happy, that I had made my dear parents and relatives so happy, and never troubled about whether my experience was what our Methodist friends would call

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a genuine conversion or not. As an overwhelming sense of my own awful sinfulness and utter depravity before God had no part whatever in it, I suppose that it would scarcely have satisfied the demands of a technical orthodox conversion. But it entirely satisfied my own people ; and it also marked the definite close of the first part of my religious experience.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST CRISIS

IN the spring of 1881 everything seemed well with me. My religious training had just culminated in an open declaration of allegiance to Christ and a firm resolve to tread the path of faith and duty. And then, quite unexpectedly, there came a crisis in my mental life that completely altered my whole subsequent career. Little as my family or I knew it, my religious training and education, so far from having reached completion, were only just going to begin.

John R— and I were fast friends, and we continued our evening walks and talks together. Religion was a favourite topic with us, though hardly a usual one for boys who had just entered their teens. One evening my friend introduced the subject of Hell and Eternal Perdition; what did I think about it? To tell the honest truth, I had never really thought about it at all. I had just accepted

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a belief in the dogma as I had accepted, in good faith, everything else that my parents and teachers had told me. However, the fundamental article of our belief was that God was good ; and my friend, who was quite sincere in his inquiry, asked me how I could reconcile the existence of a place of horrible and endless torment with that of an Omnipotent Being who was perfectly good. We discussed the matter for some time, and, no doubt, brought in the question of sin and its punishment. But R—, who had really pondered on the subject, while I had not, pressed home to my mind the awful horror of everlasting misery and the impossibility of believing that a truly good God would punish any of his creatures for ever and ever. The thought was ghastly, and, in fact, inconceivable. In a moment it flashed upon me that here there was a real contradiction. The Bible said that God was love ; and yet, he could permit, nay, actually appoint, everlasting, horrible, and purposeless suffering in his own Creation. Never ! Impossible ! I could no longer believe it. Hell as a place of eternal perdition, with fire or otherwise, ceased to be conceivable to me. I rejected

the dogma with the whole force of my being. I could not believe in God if I had to believe in an endless hell. The one absolutely contradicted the other. I entirely agreed with my friend, that there could be no such place as hell in the popular sense of the term. We bade each other good night ; and I returned home a changed human being.

For what was it that had really happened ? Not merely that I had refused to accept any longer the orthodox dogma of hell—thousands of men and women had done that already—but that, at last, I had dared *to think for myself* in matters of religion. For the very first time in my life, I questioned the truth of something which I had been taught to believe as absolutely true. My quiescent state of mind with regard to the Bible and the doctrines of the Christian faith had passed away for ever. Young as I was, I had the audacity, along with my still bolder schoolboy friend, to deny what had been taught to us by our Church, and to refuse to accept any longer a belief in the everlasting torments of the damned. We had unconsciously made our appeal to a Higher Authority—the reason and conscience in man—and even such measure of these

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as our boyish minds were able to possess unhesitatingly condemned the current dogma of hell as an outrage on common sense and rank blasphemy of the goodness and love of God.

I had dared to think for myself. Up to that moment I had accepted, without a single misgiving or the shadow of a doubt, all that had been taught to me. Even children have frequently to decide for themselves in trivial matters: as a student of history I must often have passed judgment on famous characters and events. But religion was something quite different; it was fenced off from the ordinary thoughts and opinions of men; it was hallowed ground, not to be desecrated by the usual procedure of life. And yet, I had now dared to think for myself, even in religion, and to oppose my own opinion, that of a mere child, to the authority of orthodox parents and teachers. We must remember that this was thirty years ago, when the New Theology was not even heard of. It is no wonder that I felt excited as I made the bold avowal—I still remember the exact spot near the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh—for I felt, even then, that a crisis in my life had come, and that there

was involved in my revolt against the most atrocious of dogmas an entire change of attitude in religion. That night, while my brother was sleeping peacefully at my side, I long lay awake thinking over my momentous talk with my friend. I knew that an important change had taken place in me ; but little did I dream that I had only just begun the toilsome ascent of the lofty mountain of God-search, in which the path would lead upward, through dreariest mist, and cloud, and darkness, into the brilliant and eternal sunshine of the love and goodness of the Most High.

CHAPTER III

'A JEALOUS GOD'

AT last I had begun to think for myself in religion. It was more a revolt of the conscience than of the reason; but the result was precisely the same. I commenced to question and consider and reflect. If I had been brought up a Roman Catholic, I might, possibly, have stifled my doubts and crushed down my rebellious thoughts. But I was a Protestant and a descendant of Presbyterians who, in religion, had defied the authority of bishops and kings; I believed in the right of private judgment; and it never occurred to me, for a moment, that I was doing anything wrong in beginning to think for myself on sacred topics. Wrong, indeed! Nay, rather, a thousand times right in discarding for ever the horrible belief that a merciful God could torture millions of his creatures in an endless hell. Had I not been taught that God was good? Well,

I must believe him to be really good, and not a monster of cruelty and injustice.

Gradually I began to form my own conception of God ; and my awe and reverence for him became more and more associated with feelings of love. I was jealous for his honour ; and nothing pained me so much as the attributing to him anything that contradicted his perfect goodness and mercy. I could not believe that what was wrong and cruel and unjust in man could be right and justifiable in the Most High. And I was now prepared to maintain this self-evident principle in the face of the infallible Bible itself. Scales had fallen from my eyes ; and, when I looked again at its pages, a strange transformation had come over a great part of the Old Testament. I am not aware that my friend John R— did anything to accelerate the process of my thought. We must have had several other talks on religion after our momentous discussion on eternal punishment ; but I cannot recall the substance of any. Henceforth I ploughed my furrow alone. Sometimes I would speak to my brother of the new thoughts that were surging up in my breast ; and he was sympathetic enough, but not specially interested.

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My father and mother being thousands of miles away, I could not talk over my difficulties with them; and I was very shy about writing on such subjects. Besides, why trouble them? I imagined, rightly or wrongly, that my father could do nothing to really solve my main problem—how to account for the character of God as depicted in the historical books of the Old Testament.

‘For I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God.’ God jealous? How could that be if he were truly loving and good? In vain I puzzled over the matter. And then, the Jehovah who sent such terrible plagues on the Egyptians and commanded the extermination of the women and children of the Amalekites, who was so implacable in his wrath against disobedient Israel, and threatened such fearful judgments on the heathen, was almost as difficult to reconcile with the highest ideal of love and goodness as the ordainer of an everlasting hell. ‘I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God.’ How the words now seemed to clang in my ear! Why had I been so deaf before? A jealous God, a jealous God! The Bible itself said so, and the Bible was the very word of God himself, and absolutely true. There must be some

dreadful mistake somewhere. A jealous God! No, never! God is good; and, Bible or no Bible, anything that contradicts that must be false. I would not, I could not, believe it. ‘The Old Testament, which declares such things about God, cannot be true. The New Testament says that God is love. I believe that. I hold to that. The New Testament alone will be my Bible; and I reject altogether the divine authority of the other.’ There was no alternative for me in the case of a book which was declared to be infallible.

So rapid was the progress of my thought, that, to the best of my belief, within three or four months after my revolt against the dogma of hell, I had ceased to accept the infallibility of Holy Scripture, and repudiated the sacred authority of the Old Testament altogether. I had, indeed, begun to decide for myself on the highest of all subjects; but, as before, it was the revolt of conscience, and not that of reason. It was the ‘jealous God,’ and not Joshua’s standing sun, nor Balaam’s speaking ass, that stirred me. I did not trouble then at all about the miraculous, although a belief in some of the more stupendous and incredible Bible

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miracles must have gradually faded from my mind.

It was on the New Testament that I now took my stand. The Revised Version of it was issued that very summer ; and I immediately bought a copy. The actual words of Jesus Christ had assumed a new importance in my eyes ; and, when my uncle in London made me a present of a Greek New Testament with the Revisers' Readings, I remember that I formed the design of underlining in red ink all the reported utterances of the Divine Founder of Christendom. I had lost my external authority in religion in rejecting the disagreeable Deity of the Fourth Commandment. I still sought outward sanction for the worship of the highest in the unmistakable words of the Lord Jesus. He, at any rate, had taught us to worship something higher than 'a jealous God.'

CHAPTER IV

DOUBTS AND PERPLEXITIES

MY very laudable intention to mark off all the actual words of Jesus Christ in my Greek Testament, and thus to form a kind of Bible within the Bible, somehow or other, was never fulfilled. As my conscience and intellect were now wideawake in religious matters, fresh doubts and perplexities invaded my mind. I could no longer believe, with simple unquestioning faith, that which I did not understand. My reason refused any more to accept an absolutely unintelligible dogma solely on the authority of others. As a boy of fifteen or sixteen, I naturally could make nothing of the Trinity. I had never even heard of those people called Unitarians ; but I was fast coming to hold their fundamental beliefs. So far from Jesus ever saying that he was identical with God, did he not pray to God as to his heavenly Father ? And, on the cross, did he not

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exclaim, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' The Fourth Gospel was too deep for me; I let it alone. I had now reached the stage of criticizing the sermons which I heard in church; and the substitutionary theory of the Atonement, and such dogmas as original sin and human depravity came into direct collision with my boyish logic. Sermons on eternal punishment made my ears tingle; but I rejoiced to come across a little book by a Congregational minister, declaring that that doctrine was becoming the stumbling-block of the churches.

Hitherto I had seen no heretical or sceptical literature whatever; although, in my general reading, I must have learned the fact that, besides the ancient heathen and present non-Christian nations, there were many people, even in Britain, who did not accept the Bible or believe in God. My aunt told me one day that a gentleman, who was going to accompany us on an excursion in the Isle of Wight, was an atheist and never went to church. I remember looking at him with the greatest curiosity, and being quite astonished that he should laugh and joke like any other mortal. At that time, I thought that a man who denied the existence

of God must be a monster of depravity. What should I have said, I wonder, if some one had prophesied to me, 'you will be an atheist yourself some day.' It was not till I was nineteen that I felt the slightest doubt as to the existence of a perfectly good God ; but, two years before then, I had quite given up all belief in the miraculous. In my last year at school, and my first at the University, I used to discuss religious questions with some of my fellow-students. Several of these intended entering the Church ; and I myself would certainly have been one of the number but for my very heretical views. I well remember how one of the students urged God's infinite justice as a defence of the dogma of hell, and another sought for evidence in the library to convince me that a whale could really swallow a man. I was a confirmed doubter, and had the audacity to use my common sense in judging of the contents of the Bible. The Scottish Presbyterian ministry was certainly no place for me ; at any rate, in those days.

The next great advance in my thought came with the reading of Lecky's 'History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne.' The introduction to that work,

among other topics, treats of miracles in general ; and the arguments adduced seemed to me sufficient to overthrow their credibility. I ceased to believe in the miraculous, or that an infinitely perfect God could act in any such arbitrary and spasmodic fashion. Immense consequences were involved in my new attitude ; and my mind did not hesitate to push the revolt against miracle to all its logical conclusions. The last vestige of Biblical authority had to go. There could have been no Virgin Birth, or literal resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In fact, Jesus Christ himself could have been no more than human. Without my knowing it, I had come right down to Unitarianism. At this time also, without properly understanding it, I accepted the theory of evolution as the true substitute for the Mosaic account of the Creation.

Imagining, then, that there was no Christianity possible, except strict orthodoxy, I frankly ceased to consider myself a Christian. And yet, my belief in God was even stronger than before. I turned to the voice of conscience as the authoritative witness of his Being. I strove harder than ever before to do what was right, and composed a list of

Rules of Conduct for myself, which I kept carefully hidden in a drawer. Of these rules I remember the first two were : I. Love everybody, II. Have faith in God. One sunny day in that spring of 1884, I was walking by myself in the 'Meadows' in Edinburgh. I was pondering over the great crisis that had been taking place in my mental and religious life and all that it involved ; and I asked myself this question— 'What is your religion now, seeing that you no longer believe in Christianity ?' The answer seemed to come quite spontaneously to my mind— 'The religion of love.'

CHAPTER V

A DYING FAITH

AND now, for a time, I seemed to have found peace. My long controversy with orthodoxy was at an end. Hell-fire, jealous deities, talking asses, and legions of swinish devils could no more disturb or perplex me. My faith seemed altogether reasonable and satisfactory. I trusted in God ; I believed in his perfect goodness and love ; I heard his voice in the commands of conscience. But I still craved for more light. What was this philosophy that the wisest of men had spent their lives in cultivating ? I must see. With the Christmas-box my aunt had given me I purchased G. H. Lewes' ' History of Philosophy ' in two volumes. My friend John R— used to talk to me of George Henry Lewes and George Eliot ; otherwise I do not know why I should have chosen that particular book. It was certainly tough reading for a youth of eighteen ; and, of

course, the greater part of the work was really quite beyond my comprehension. The first volume, which treats of the ancient Greek systems, I followed fairly well; but the metaphysics from Descartes to Hegel! Oh, what a relief to get to Auguste Comte and his Positive Philosophy. Here I was on firm ground again; and I naturally agreed with all that Lewes says about his philosopher hero.

The whole aim of Lewes' 'History of Philosophy' is to demonstrate the utter futility of metaphysics to solve the great problems of existence and to vindicate the Positive Philosophy, which recognizes no facts but those of sensation and experience. The argument of this book had the most vital consequences in my entire mental and religious development, for it led me to follow the sensational school of philosophy instead of any of the systems that upheld intuition. My leaders were Alexander Bain and John Stuart Mill. I studied their works on logic, and eagerly imbibed the spirit of their teaching. I was greatly attracted by the clearness and intelligibility of their philosophy—no metaphysical abstractions, no hazy speculations, no endless word-spinning

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without any corresponding reality. I little knew at first where this particular road was going to take me ; but that it was, indeed, by far the best way for me in the end, the sequel of my story will clearly show.

When I was eighteen years of age, I was so satisfied with my own theological position, that I secretly composed a dialogue illustrating and explaining it. All that I can recollect of it now is, that it emphasized the unity of God and made conscience the revelation of his nature and will to men ; it also declared for a Providence overruling all things for good. But soon there came 'a rift within the lute.'

I cannot tell precisely when I first had doubts about the divine origin of conscience ; but Bain, in his 'Mental and Moral Science,' taught me that conscience was a composite faculty made up of various elements of human nature. In fact, according to him, it has its origin in human law and custom, and varies among peoples and individuals with their civilization and general culture. He mentions the case of the Turkish woman, whose conscience makes her feel as guilty in remaining unveiled before a male stranger as if she were committing a heinous crime.

And then there are the well-known instances of slavery, and polygamy, and religious persecution, which show that the dictates of conscience alter from age to age, and differ even in individuals of the same family and race. But if so, what becomes of its divine authority and witness to the existence of God? I was staggered by this blow, and had nothing then with which to meet it.

With the loss of this support from conscience, there came the first real doubts into my mind as to the existence of a God, who was goodness and love. There was still the outward world; but now it, too, began to reveal to me its more terrible aspects—endless suffering in nature, famines, earthquakes, hideous diseases, miseries, death. Was there really a God who permitted such things to happen to his creatures? Where was his power? Where was his goodness? Where his love? ‘I faltered, where I firmly trod.’ My faith in the heavenly Father’s care received such shocks that I began to wonder how long it could endure.

That autumn, in my uncle’s library in London, I came across a summary of Comte’s Positive Philosophy by G. H. Lewes. I read it; and there entered into my mind,

for the first time, the conception of a universe of invariable law. This at once appeared to shut out all question of a Providence and destroy the efficacy of prayer. 'If the laws of nature are universal and absolutely unchangeable,' I said to myself, 'then what is the use of asking God to do anything? Our prayers cannot make a particle of difference.' So I did not utter another real prayer for about seven years.

My faith was now, indeed, beginning to totter, yet I clung desperately to a belief in the existence of God. I thought that, surely, John Stuart Mill would be able to help me; and no one could have read with more feverish eagerness his three 'Essays on Religion.' It was the one on 'Theism' that I really wanted. I read it in July, 1886, and it kept alive my belief in God for nearly three years longer. I need not, however, enter into a discussion of the Essay, for the famous argument from design, on which alone Mill relies for a scientific proof of the existence of God, has been completely shattered by the Darwinian theory of natural selection. Even in the Essay itself, Mill refers to the new doctrine of evolution, and sees how seriously it threatens his own argument;

but his final conclusion is 'I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in nature afford a large balance of probability in favour of Creation by intelligence.'

I had, however, to be satisfied with even less than that, for Mill can ascribe to his Creator only limited power and, perhaps, even limited intelligence. And finally, he removes the whole domain of the supernatural from 'the region of belief into that of simple hope.' A drowning man will clutch at straws, so that I was glad to receive even this meagre religious consolation. I clung to the argument from design ; but, for all that, my faith got weaker and weaker ; and, soon after my twentieth birthday, I definitely turned to the so-called religion of humanity as the supreme ideal for which to work.

God was becoming a vanishing quantity in my life ; and it was to me a period of great mental suffering and distress. I was spending a year in the island of Cyprus with my parents. They were deeply grieved at my sceptical views. My father argued and argued in vain. He gave me books to read ; but these, being out-of-date, never touched

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on my real difficulties in the way of belief. Nothing could induce me to accept incredible miracle. Orthodox Christianity was clearly opposed to the teachings of science ; and I could not oppose the dictates of reason and common sense. That year was undoubtedly the most miserable in my life. My belief in God was fast ebbing away till, at length, I sadly removed the second Rule of Conduct from the list that I kept by me in secret. 'Have faith in God' was no longer a command binding on me ; but 'Love everybody' was more imperative than ever. God or no God, there was always humanity to live for. We spent the summer in camp life on Mount Troödos ; and, wandering there amidst the pine and arbutus, I realized more than ever before that Truth was the only Bible fit for the universe.

CHAPTER VI

A POSITIVE ATHEIST

I RETURNED to my solitary lodgings in Edinburgh with a growing enthusiasm for the service of humanity and a dying faith in the existence of God. I attended classes at the University ; but all my interest was centred in the problems of man's life and destiny. These would not let me rest. I read all I could of Bain and Mill. I accepted the latter's 'Utilitarianism' as my own belief ; and the idea of conscience being in any way of divine origin or sanction seemed utterly impossible to me. It was the second of J. S. Mill's 'Essays on Religion' that interested me more now. In it he argues for a religion without supernatural sanctions, and even goes so far as to declare that, in time, immortality, and not annihilation, may become the burdensome idea. I bought and read James Cotter Morison's 'Service of Man,' which only confirmed all my objec-

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tions against orthodox Christianity, and all but destroyed the last lingering traces of my theism. What impressed me most in that book was the argument against an anthropomorphic or man-like Deity being the Infinite Power of the universe.

And now I was on the point of reaching the final stage in my painful journey of doubt and unbelief. How well I remember the sudden extinguishing of the last flicker of the candle. At Christmas time, 1888, I was attracted by Grant Allen's little biography of Charles Darwin. The book, of course, contains an exposition of the theory of natural selection ; but I did not fully grasp the meaning of this on the first reading. It was on the evening of February 4th, 1889, that something or other made me look at the book again. I turned to the part relating to Darwin's famous law, and suddenly the meaning flashed out clear to my mind. The 'variations' are purely accidental ; and it is entirely by chance, so the theory affirms, that some creatures are favoured by them in the struggle for life. I think one of the illustrations given was that of the tiger and his stripes. Natural selection had made his coat a perfect screen to him in the jungle

reeds in which he lay concealed ; but the useful variations in the colour of the skin had gradually come by chance. I saw it all now. Accidental variation. No design at all ; no designer, no purpose, no intelligence, no God. That tiger had devoured the last faint hopes lingering in my breast, that there might be a God who had created and still cared for us. My heart sank within me. Oh, the bitter agony of that moment ! I can recall it all even now—my little room in Marchmont Road, the fireplace, my chair, and the awful blank that came into my desolate life that night.

Though I had long since ceased to pray, or to believe in any Providence directing our steps towards some high destiny, I, nevertheless, cherished the hope that a good and loving Creator was indeed a reality, the thought of whom might afford some comfort and consolation to the children of men. Better even John Stuart Mill's limited Deity than none at all : he could, at least, be as morally perfect as we chose to believe ; and there was some satisfaction in the thought of being his co-workers in overcoming the evil in the world. He was, at any rate, a Being infinitely higher and better

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than we, whom we could reverence and worship. But now all that was gone ; the last vestige of him had vanished from my life. It was a blind, pitiless Force that was master of the universe.

I had entirely lost God ; but I was to go even further than that. I was soon to utterly deny his existence and become a Positive Atheist. My mind seemed to be so constituted that it could not be content with uncertainty and ignorance. It must accept either one thing or the other. Unlike so many people nowadays, who seem quite satisfied to go through life with absolutely no opinion as to the existence of God or a future life, I required a definite answer, Yes or No. I could not, at that time, occupy a position of perfect neutrality or indifference between two mutually conflicting views. One of them must be false, and the other true. Either there was a God or there was no God ; either there was a future life or there was not. I could not remain impassive and declare that I was really totally unable to make up my mind one way or the other. Such a helpless, hopeless mode of procedure would be suicidal in practical everyday life ; nor do I believe that it is at all common in

religion. The man who says that he can never possibly know whether there is a God or no, has practically in his heart of hearts decided that there is none. The ultimate test of all belief is action ; and that man's actions will speak for themselves. Not even his highest thoughts and impulses will he ever refer to the inspiration of that God, of whose existence he professes to remain in such fair and impartial ignorance.

As God was no longer to me the designer of this wonderful and beautiful world, how, then, did it all come about ? That was the question I had to puzzle over as soon as I realized that the Darwinian theory had destroyed all marks of intelligent adaptation in nature. In three weeks I solved the problem to my entire satisfaction. While I was walking to Leith one Sunday afternoon, it suddenly flashed into my mind that the universe could be accounted for by the continual clash of atoms : the concourse of these ultimate particles of matter had gradually built up this world of material things, including, of course, our brains and all that issued from them. Do not smile, gentle reader. I was only a young man, a *very* young man, of twenty-two. Herbert

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Spencer, who was soon to be my guide, plainly did not teach this crude Materialism ; he expressly repudiated it in his philosophy. But this was how the process appeared to me then.

And, after all, was my youthful solution of the problem any worse than that of the thousands of atheists who have openly avowed their unbelief since man began to grapple with the greatest questions of existence ? Was it any worse than that of the countless numbers to-day who are open or secret agnostics, and who, while professing to maintain a position of neutrality on the subject, know in their inmost hearts that that is the only way by which they, too, can account for the origin and working of the universe ? Materialism is now supposed to be almost extinct in the world. Never was there a greater mistake. As a philosophical interpretation of the facts of existence, Materialism has, no doubt, had its day ; but only a mere fraction of mankind are philosophers ; and the majority of those who deny or doubt the existence of God, though they may repudiate the name of atheist, believe in the all-sufficiency of matter and motion to account for everything.

They are, in fact, agnostics because they are materialists. They do not really believe in soul or spirit, though they may modestly declare that they cannot make up their minds. The old atheism was frankly materialistic; the new agnosticism is practically so. Of course, there are many exceptions; and later on in my story I shall introduce the reader to an agnostic who was far removed from atheism and materialism.

At twenty-two, however, I was a Positive Atheist. I sincerely believed that the materialistic theory could account for everything in the universe. But, though I was quite certain that there was no God, I naturally preferred to call myself an agnostic. The term was less dogmatic, and did not sound to others so impious and wicked. Besides, I soon afterwards read Herbert Spencer's 'First Principles' as well as his 'Principles of Biology' and 'Psychology,' though I was neither interested in his Religion of the Unknowable, nor did I follow his repudiation of materialism. Instead of the God of goodness and love, whom I fondly believed in during my boyhood's years, the great philosopher of evolution taught me that there was this infinite, inscrutable Power

of the universe, whose existence was as certain as our own. Of course, we could know nothing of this Deity ; but, at any rate, we were not atheists, and I could escape from that stigma. All the same, I was a thoroughgoing materialist, for mere names could make no difference.

I was now absolutely without God in the world. The final stroke had come with the idea, that the concourse or mutual attraction and repulsion of material atoms was the cause of all things. I did not seek to know what first started the atoms on their career. My hopes of a future life had long been fading away ; and now, if there was nothing in existence but these atoms, the whole conception of survival after death was impossible and inconceivable. My quest for truth seemed to have deprived me both of God and of immortality. I had been losing my faith so long and so gradually, that the shock of its final overthrow, though very bitter and grievous, was much less stunning than it might have been. It was naturally a severe blow to my parents and relatives. The search for truth appeared to have ended in nothing but misery and disaster. Yet, it also brought with it a feeling of peace and

contentment. Never for a moment did I regret that evening's talk on everlasting punishment with my friend John R—, when I had begun to think for myself. The intervening eight years had been full of sadness for me ; but I felt that I had only done my simple duty in pursuing truth at all costs. Like the hunter in Olive Schreiner's well-known parable in her 'Story of an African Farm'—a book which I did not see till I had become a minister of religion—I, too, had sorrowfully parted with all my birds, even the beautiful, soft-eyed, white-feathered creature called Immortality. I cared for the truth alone ; and I was content. I had lost God, lost eternal life, lost every comfort and consolation of the Christian faith. But I had not lost Duty.

CHAPTER VII

THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY

HERBERT SPENCER was now my recognized teacher. I accepted what I could understand of his synthetic philosophy, and regarded the great philosopher of evolution as the wisest man who ever lived. I remember telling one of my fellow-students at Edinburgh University that Spencer had rendered the sceptical position in religion 'impregnable.' And now I really felt at peace. After tossing on the stormy billows of religious doubts and difficulties for so many years, it was a distinct relief to me to cast anchor in the still, quiet haven of agnosticism. During the two years that I remained there I did not for a moment imagine that I should ever leave it again.

My position seemed secure enough. I was a convinced and determined agnostic, or, as I have already explained, I was, more correctly speaking, a Positive Atheist. I had abandoned every particle of belief in

the supernatural. No fresh argument or controversy could possibly deprive me of anything, for the simple reason that I had nothing whatever to lose. To me God was a big round O, and the soul a little round o. I believed only in an infinitude of little particles of inconceivably fine dust, called atoms. Bishop Berkeley had denied their existence, I understood; but I had no need of Doctor Johnson's thumping fist to support me against any opponent who dared attack me there. 'Call these atoms Spirit, if you like, and not Matter: call them Force'—I did not say, 'Conceive them as Force'—call them anything. There they are, vouched for by science, supported by common sense, for all the matter we know of is minutely divisible. These atoms have certain properties; and their combinations and mutual relations, as governed by force, make up these invariable laws of nature, which it is the business of science to explore.

Such was my materialistic creed, simple enough in all conscience, with neither God, angel, ghost, nor devil, to ruffle the calm surface of my thought. No one could knock me down in argument, for I was lying flat on the ground already, and could get no lower.

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No more perplexities, no more doubts, no more difficulties. No more questions to solve, no more contradictions to reconcile, no more problems to settle. At last, I could rest and be at peace. From February, 1889, to March, 1891, my views on the fundamental problems of existence underwent no change.

After defying orthodoxy, as a mere boy, and rebelling against all outward authority in religion, as a youth, it was not likely that I should be ever prepared to give up my intellectual independence and abandon my right of private judgment. I was not going to make a Pope of Herbert Spencer, even though I had become his disciple. In one very important matter I entirely differed from him. I refused to accept his Religion of the Unknowable. In this particular question I followed the lead of Auguste Comte, Frederic Harrison, and John Stuart Mill. It was especially the last named who gave me my real interest and enthusiasm for the religion of humanity. I called myself an agnostic; but, all along, I passionately declared that mere agnosticism was not enough. We must have the noblest and highest aim that we could possibly conceive of. That aim was to live for others, to do

all the good that we could to our brothers and sisters of mankind, to make the service of man our supreme ideal in life. Our duty was to seek the truth, and to be as loving and unselfish as we could. So, after all, I *did* believe in something more than in naughts and atoms. I could not bear to exist without a lofty purpose in life; and the religion of humanity appeared to satisfy my deeper emotions and desires.

To this pass had matters come in my mental development, when circumstances, arising largely from my unhappy religious differences with my family, led me, friendless and alone, across the Atlantic Ocean to Canada. I spent six months in Manitoba; and, in February, 1890, went still further west, over the Rocky Mountains, into British Columbia, where I became a schoolmaster in the neighbourhood of Victoria, the capital, in the extreme south of Vancouver Island. For more than a year after my arrival in British Columbia, my religious views were the same as when I left Edinburgh. I was still an agnostic materialist, and also an ardent supporter of the religion of humanity. I became deeply interested in questions of political and social reform, and looked for-

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ward to the regeneration of society, when oppression would be finally overthrown.

At Winnipeg I had picked up and read a pamphlet entitled 'Christianity and Agnosticism,' issued by the Humboldt Publishing Company, which contained controversial papers by Professor Huxley, Dr. Wace, and Mr. W. H. Mallock. I could not lose all interest in the old questions, though their solution no longer troubled me. Mr. Mallock's article on 'Cowardly Agnosticism' did not, in any way, influence me on that occasion, for it was directed mainly against Spencer's Religion of the Unknowable, and so, as I thought, did not specially concern me. In Victoria, I happened to see some essays by James Allanson Picton on 'The Mystery of Matter' and 'The Philosophy of Ignorance.' I bought these, but did not at once read them. I also purchased and read Sir John Lubbock's 'Pleasures of Life' and Herbert Spencer's 'Data of Ethics.'

Strange that I should, quite unknowingly, be providing myself with material that was to help me to break away altogether from my atheistic creed, and enable me to pass right through atheism and agnosticism into the region of God's ineffable light and love.

PART II

**FROM ATHEISM TO A SURE FAITH
IN GOD**



CHAPTER I

THE GREAT TURNING-POINT

THE first, and much the easier, part of my task is now done. I have tried to show how, after having received a most excellent training in the orthodox Christian faith, step by step, through a long and painful mental struggle, I drifted into the most thoroughgoing materialism and a categorical denial of the existence of God. I called myself an agnostic, but was really an atheist. I believed no longer in soul or spirit, and it naturally followed that a future life was an impossibility.

I was quite certain, too, that from now I should never change. Formerly, I should have been horrified if anyone had told me that some day I should be an atheist: now I should have been immensely amused if anyone had said to me, 'You will, one day, be proclaiming the love and goodness of God

from a pulpit.' I should have replied, quite sincerely and seriously, 'My dear fellow, I have quite as much chance of flying to the moon.' Not that I was ever really satisfied with my hopeless unbelief. I was not like some extraordinary people I have since met, who seemed actually to prefer annihilation to immortality, and the cast-iron laws of the unknowable Power to a heavenly Father's love and care. I never for a moment underestimated the extreme value of what I had lost. But I was naturally of a sanguine disposition ; and I determined to make the most of life such as it was. There was always humanity to live for and the reward of a good conscience. So I was not unhappy, even without hope and without God in the world.

And now there was to come a momentous change which gradually transformed the whole universe to me, and gave me back very much more than I had ever lost. The real, and much the harder part of my task is now about to begin. It is so much easier to pull down than to build up, to destroy than to create, to obliterate faith than to inspire it. But I must now endeavour to show how, starting from the level of the most determined atheism, I gradually laid the

foundation of a glorious and unassailable faith in the Infinite truth, love, and goodness of God.

On Sunday, March 8th, 1891, a lady secularist lecturer gave the first of three addresses in the Theatre in Victoria, B.C. At that time I was occupying a room in Broad Street, and was naturally very much interested in this open proclamation of secularism in Canada. I attended all three lectures, and my enthusiasm for what I then honestly deemed to be the truth was so stirred, that I resolved to join the Secular Society of Victoria. Later on in the week, I called on the President of the Society to accomplish that end. On the following Sunday evening I debated in my mind whether I should go to the service in the Roman Catholic Church—I loved music, and was a regular church-goer on Sundays just to listen to it—or should read the Essay by J. Allanson Picton on ‘The Mystery of Matter.’ I decided on the latter course, not dreaming that the great turning-point of my life had come.

The careful perusal of Mr. Picton’s essay, once and for all, delivered me from the crude materialism which had dominated my mind

for more than two years. As long as I was bound to that, I was a helpless prisoner, and it was quite impossible for me to attain to a broader and saner outlook on life and the universe. But, that memorable Sunday evening, I flung myself on the bed in my little room, and eagerly read what Mr. Picton had to tell me on the subject of matter. His argument convinced me that there was, indeed, this wonderful mystery about the material atoms, and that they were not hard impenetrable particles of the finest dust, but were centres of force, which could interpenetrate one another, as in chemical combinations. The complete mystery attaching to this unknowable thing called Force also removed every difficulty as regards its capacity of manifesting sensation and thought.

In my very hasty conclusion, that the concourse of atoms could produce everything in the universe, it never occurred to me to ask how such a clashing together of dust could ever result in consciousness and feeling. Let anyone try to imagine it, and the thing is perfectly inconceivable. Dust—atomic dust—combining with similar dust in millions and millions of different ways, cannot bring us a single step nearer to sensation. That

material atoms, in the current conception of the term—‘hard little kernels of a substance fundamentally different from and incommensurable with the life which is the only mode of being that I certainly and directly know’—could ever, even in an eternity, be able to feel and think and know, is utterly inconceivable, and cannot be true. Can you really imagine or conceive it? Even before my reading of Mr. Picton’s essay on ‘The Mystery of Matter,’ such a question would have completely floored me. I know that I cannot possibly conceive or imagine any such thing. Herbert Spencer would have kept me right there if I had properly understood him. But now Mr. Picton had opened my eyes. I, at last, saw that my conception of Matter was utterly misleading and false, that whatever it was, it was certainly not a collection of impenetrable particles of the finest conceivable or inconceivable dust, and that the idea of its atoms as being centres of this unknowable and mysterious force came as near the truth as our minds could reach.

Of course, I cannot transcribe here the whole of Mr. Picton’s luminous essay on ‘The Mystery of Matter,’ nor its sequel on

‘The Philosophy of Ignorance.’ If I did not read the latter that same evening, I must have done so very soon afterwards. But my account of how I came to abandon positive atheism for a reverent and religious agnosticism would hardly be deemed satisfactory or complete if I did not, at least, briefly sum up the argument which struck home so forcibly to me, that it changed my whole outlook on the world.

It is towards the close of the essay on ‘The Mystery of Matter’ that the author discusses the vital question. After explaining what we generally mean by matter—something that exclusively occupies space—and refuting by means of the phenomena of expansion through heat, the doctrine of Descartes, that matter is continuous and divisible beyond any conceivable limit, Mr. Picton comes to the Atomic Theory. This theory ‘teaches that matter is ultimately constituted of minute indivisible particles which are separated one from another by spaces immeasurably small, yet still definite and real’; and it receives strong confirmation from the facts of chemistry. But Mr. Picton disputes and disproves the allegation of the physical philosopher that these indivisible particles

or atoms are hard little impenetrable kernels of a substance different from force and life. By the theory itself there is absolutely no matter between the atoms, so that all their effects—their attractions and repulsions—one upon another ‘must be exerted across a void—that is, through a medium of nothingness; or, in other words, the presence of Force does not necessarily imply the presence of matter; and the only reason for assuming the latter as anything different from Force is given up.’ That the Atomic Theory, *in some form*, is true is plainly indicated by the phenomena of chemical proportions; but, when this theory takes the materialistic shape, it is inconsistent with the very phenomena which suggested it. It is inconceivable how two substances like oxygen and hydrogen could produce a third so utterly unlike both as water, unless we can think of our atoms as others think of the empty spaces between them, that is, as elementary phenomena of Force ‘capable of wholly interpenetrating one another, and of thus producing an entirely new mode of Force, or, in common language, a new substance.’

Mr. Picton then criticizes the ordinary conception of matter as a dead, inert sub-

stance—a notion which has been engendered by the resistance of phenomena to our will—whereas the true way of looking at the atoms would be to regard them as ultimate centres of energy and of a universal spiritual power. ‘Life we know; Force we feel; nothing more.’ He sums up his conclusions as follows :—

‘If we can prove nothing, we can at least disprove what threatens the annihilation of faith. True, the faith that we save may be no sectarian’s creed. Yet surely it is something dearer far to every sect alike; the loyalty of the soul to that inspiration from the unsearchable, which is the ultimate motive power of progress. What, then, I gain by the view for which I earnestly contend is this: that no material phenomena, be they what they may, can shame or fright those sentiments of divine life and love which are engendered through the heart. All forms of finite existence may, for aught I care, be reduced to modes of motion; but motion itself has become to me only the phenomenal manifestation of the energy of an infinite life in which it is a joy to be lost.’

And this was the message which so unexpectedly came to me on that Sunday

evening in March, 1891. Atoms not impenetrable kernels of hard substance. Atoms not like infinitely minute grains of dust or sand ; but centres of Force. Matter not dead, but living. The universe not inert, and cold, and lifeless ; but the manifestation of eternal energy. Motion itself the phenomenal manifestation of infinite life.

From the bed on which I had been lying reading, I arose another being. It was an awakening from death. My sole thought, for some time, was that of wonderful mysterious Force, which was present in every atom of the visible world around me. The old dead atoms, hard, impenetrable, and clashing together like pebbles in a bag had gone for ever. I at last felt that it was not the real world that I saw, but mere phenomena—appearances—and that the only reality was that unknowable and all-prevailing Force or energy, in which I lived, and moved, and had my being. Then, and not till then, did I really perceive the meaning of Herbert Spencer's infinite inscrutable Power. Humanity, what was it compared with that ? A few fleeting bubbles on the surface of the boundless ocean. Positivism and the religion of humanity slunk away out of the

back-door, for I had opened the windows of my soul to that infinite, eternal, and omnipresent Power, whose laws held sway in the most distant heavens as well as in the very dust at my feet.

‘The Mystery of Matter’ had entirely transformed the universe to me. ‘The Philosophy of Ignorance’ not only confirmed the conclusions of the previous essay, but restored to me my long-lost belief in the reality of soul or spirit. Mr. Picton first argues against the view that matter and spirit are two separate and distinct substances as alleged in the orthodox Christian dogma of Creation out of nothing, and then proceeds to show that spirit cannot be a mere generalization of certain phenomena of matter.

To me the really convincing part of the argument was that based on the fact of personal identity continuing amidst the constant disintegration of tissue involved in mental operations. This identity, which cannot depend on changing brain molecules, must, according to the materialistic view, depend upon ‘the continuity of the vibrations, or other physical affections, which are handed on from one generation of

molecules to another.' But it is clear that an identity which depends not upon the sameness of material molecules, but upon similarity in their modes of motion, can have no existence whatever unless in a subject or mind that perceives the similarity. As Mr. Picton remarks, 'Every materialistic attempt to account for the feeling of personal identity labours under this inconsistency, that after denying everything but a succession of brain molecules with similar affections, it always proceeds on the assumption that there is something to recognize the similarity—an assumption which it is the express aim of the hypothesis to eliminate.'

Thus did I learn, through Mr. Picton's essay, that there *does* exist 'a true spiritual substance,' which, though conditioned by those forces which present themselves in the phenomena of the brain, is proved by the sense of identity to be independent of the continual flux of matter in our bodies. The soul a reality. Immortality, at least, no longer impossible. Again I experienced a kind of feeling of resurrection. I was once more a living spirit, not a mere collection of brain and nerves. Of course, I did not at once jump to the conclusion that a future

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life for me was certain, or even that it was probable ; but, at any rate, such a state of existence was now quite possible, and I could not but begin again to hope.

The real recognition of the infinite inscrutable Power and the belief in the existence of the soul were still far away from the highest comforts and consolations of religion ; yet, they were the first steps leading thither. I had, at length, emerged from the thick cloud and dreary darkness on the mountain of God-search, to steadily pursue my upward way.

CHAPTER II

AN AGNOSTIC PANTHEIST

A FEW days after this momentous crisis in my life, I received the appointment of public school teacher at Sooke, which is situated on an inlet of the sea, twenty-five miles south-west of Victoria. I went there in the full flush of my new-found faith. The notification of my due enrolment as a member of the Secular Society soon followed me by post ; but I took no further notice of it. I had no more relish for secularism or atheism, for I had come to believe in the Infinite Power of the universe, far transcending our thought, it might be ; but, nevertheless, the one real existence, of which we were but infinitesimal parts.

As I said to my predecessor in the school at Sooke, who took me to the top of Sooke Mountain, I believed in religion, but not in religions. How utterly impossible it would have been for me to have said that only a

fortnight before. I believed in religion, whereby I meant true religion—that which brings us into relationship with the Supreme Power. I saw now that the so-called religion of humanity was a misnomer : it had to do with man not God, and was nothing but a kind of glorified morality. Real religion concerns our relations with a power or powers higher than ourselves, whom man worships from a sense of need. I had turned once more to real religion, thenceforth to leave it no more. My mind was full of awe and wonder at the thought of this Infinite Power which was manifested in our consciousness as well as in the outer world.

I was now a true agnostic, for I was certain that this Power was absolutely unknowable by us ; but I was also something more. My feelings were so deep and intense, and my joy so great in the discovery of the supreme reality of existence, which I even began to think of as God, that I reflected far more on his infinity and power than I did on his inscrutability. I was once more a true worshipper of God ; and God was indeed all in all. I deliberately called myself an Agnostic Pantheist in a letter which I wrote to my father at that time ; and I still think

that the term exactly expresses the religious standpoint which I had now come to occupy. I was as firmly as ever attached to the Spencerian philosophy, and now acknowledged that the great philosopher of evolution was right in his attacks on Frederic Harrison and the Positivists, who wanted us to worship humanity. 'The Mystery of Matter' had compelled me to change sides in that controversy; and I could no longer ignore the existence of that Power, the source of all that is contained in the universe. I accepted the religion of the unknowable—all but its fantastic name—and continued firmly to believe that God was unknowable by us, and so far transcended the limits of our thought, that we could never hope to understand anything of his real nature.

And yet how I yearned to come into closer and deeper relationship with God. I tried to put together all that could be indisputably asserted of him. I remember that I was continually dwelling on six of his attributes, which could be deduced directly from his self-existence. He—I, even then, always thought of this unknowable Power as 'he' and 'him,' never as 'it'—he was infinite, eternal, omnipresent, as well as all-creating,

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all-sustaining, and all-giving. I scarcely cast a thought on his unknowability, but was constantly pondering on these positive attributes of his Being. I called myself an Agnostic Pantheist, it is true, but my agnosticism was all but submerged in my pantheism. For four months I was completely happy in this new faith. I worshipped a Being who was Infinite ; we could conceive of no limits to his existence. He was the whole, of which all other existences were but parts. He was the only reality ; and our souls were real just because they were actual parts of him. My religion was certainly Pantheism, and the immanence of God was its leading characteristic. How different was this new conception from that of my old pre-atheistic days. Then God had been to me the great designer, artificer, mechanician. I had believed in Matter as something quite apart from him. 'The Mystery of Matter' had for ever dispelled such a partial and inadequate conception of the Most High. No wonder that I was content for a time to revel in the mere thought of his existence, when that existence meant not only animate life, but even mountains and sea, and precipices and water-

falls. The roar of the waves dashing in foam against the rocks seemed to be the deep murmur of his voice. I could never have thought or felt that in my earlier years.

Even during my atheistic and materialistic days, I had been really getting nearer to the true meaning and conception of God. I was not going to descend the mountain to recover what I had lost ; but, leaving that far behind, I was gradually climbing upward to find something grander and loftier still. Without having heard of the term, I was a Monist. God was the only substance, the only reality ; but we, too, as parts of his Being, had an indestructible existence of our own. My pantheism was never of the kind which denied all reality in ourselves and all capacity for making effort. In my materialistic days I had never accepted the doctrine of necessitarianism or complete determinism. I admitted that there seemed to be a hopeless contradiction between the philosophical aspects of the question and my real consciousness ; but I held firmly to the latter. I never doubted for a moment the reality of duty ; and even my youthful logic assured me that there could not possibly be an 'ought' without a 'can.' I knew, like

everybody else, that I could try, make effort, exert myself, if I chose ; and I had to leave it at that. I was never a pantheist in denying the total freedom of the will. We were indeed *parts* of God, but independent *self-moving*, though not self-causing, parts. If this is what is called the higher pantheism, then I heartily agree with it. Pantheism or Monism of some kind can alone satisfy the intellect and highest emotions of man.

In my agnostic pantheistic days I worshipped a Being who was eternal. God had no beginning nor end in time any more than in space. Our worlds and systems evolved and dissolved, but he remained unchangeable for ever and ever. Then he was also omnipresent : there was no particle of space where he was not, so that truly in him we lived and moved and had our being. But infinity, eternity, and omnipresence would apply also to blind Force and Matter. I tried to conceive of God also as all-creating, all-sustaining, all-giving. I longed for some Being to whom I could look up in gratitude and love. God was certainly my Creator ; to him I owed all that I had ever had. He sustained me every moment of my existence, for without him I could be nothing, I could

know nothing, I could do nothing. In this way I could really adore a Power who was infinitely greater and higher than myself, but quite unknowable to my present faculties.

True to my agnosticism, I carefully avoided attributing to this Infinite Power anything that savoured of human feeling and intelligence ; and, for several weeks, as long as the rebound from my old dead materialism was still fresh and exciting, I could satisfy myself with a worship that was only wonder, mystery, and awe. I could not help also mingling with these feelings, though not very consistently, the emotions of reverence, gratitude, and love. The rolling sea, the lofty mountains on the opposite coast, and the glorious starlit sky with its myriads of shining worlds now filled my mind with solemn, awe-inspiring thoughts.

My religion was real ; but to me, at any rate, in its present unsubstantial form, it could not last. It had no obvious connexion with practical life. The novelty of these emotions would gradually wear off ; and, though I was now a thorough believer in the spiritual instead of the material aspect of nature, my soul could not remain satisfied for ever with mere feelings of mystery and

awe. What had this Infinite unknowable Power to do directly with me? That was the question. I remember puzzling over an attempt to connect its existence with the reality of duty and a supreme purpose in life ; and I arrived at the vague conclusion that since, as a fact, we existed, we ought to make the very most of our existence and to lead the happiest, the most satisfying, and the best life that we could. I earnestly desired more light on the subject, and I naturally thought that I should find it in the deeper study of Herbert Spencer's philosophy.

In July, 1891, I spent a week of my summer holiday travelling in the United States. In San Francisco, Portland in Oregon, Tacoma, and Seattle, I eagerly inquired for Spencer's 'First Principles'—I had parted with my own copy on coming to Canada. I now longed to read the book again ; but I could not get it anywhere. Instead of that, I purchased in San Francisco, among other works for teaching purposes, Joseph Baldwin's 'Elementary Psychology and Education,' a book which was to be of the utmost service to me in my search for God, while Spencer's volume could not really have helped me any more.

CHAPTER III

‘COWARDLY AGNOSTICISM’

MY enthusiasm for the Religion of the Unknowable now began to wane. Even in its more attractive form of Agnostic Pantheism, it ceased to satisfy the highest emotions and aspirations of my heart. It had no practical bearings on my present life and no reference whatever to the lofty ideals of Positivism, or the so-called religion of humanity. That, at least, had given me a definite object to strive for ; but what had the Infinite inscrutable Power to do with such an object ? Did it care about it ? Did it care, or know, about me ? That was the question which now refused to be silenced. This Power was indeed the creator, sustainer, and giver of all ; but was it so only unconsciously, blindly, and unintentionally ? If that was the case—and agnosticism declined to say that it was not—then, where was there room for reverence, gratitude,

and love? The warmth-giving sun was equally an object of adoration and praise. A power, no matter how infinite and how inscrutable, which was in utter ignorance not only of us, but even of itself, was, surely, a strange kind of God to worship. It was not a whit better or more sensible than the old Deity matter, which I used to believe in. A soul that might exist apart from the present body, but, in no conceivable case, ever really did so, was not much of an improvement on the former idea, that there was no such thing as soul at all. Doubts and perplexities once more assailed me. I could not possibly go back to my old disproved materialism; but what, after all, was the permanent value of this new conception of Matter and Force which had made such a revolution in my heart?

On the morning of the 30th. of July, it suddenly occurred to me to look again at the essay on 'Cowardly Agnosticism' by Mr. W. H. Mallock (taken from 'The Fortnightly Review' of April, 1889) which I had picked up and read at Winnipeg. Fortunately, I had still kept it with me, and now I could read it from quite another standpoint. In Winnipeg I had been a Positivist in religion;

and Mr. Mallock's strictures on 'The Religion of the Unknowable' did not seem to touch me. Now I had become an out-and-out Spencerian, even in religion, so that every word of Mr. Mallock's trenchant criticism of agnosticism drove home with most powerful effect. I did not pause till I had finished the entire essay, which is a brilliant assault on the agnostic position in its relation to the supreme fact of duty. The reader who is really dissatisfied with the negations of agnosticism could not possibly do better than see it all for himself; but it is necessary to the completeness of my story that I give, at least, the gist of the argument.

In his 'First Principles' Herbert Spencer has said that 'it is not for nothing that a man has in him sympathy with some principles and repugnance to others,' and that no one may carelessly let his thoughts die. 'When the Unknown Cause produces in him a certain belief he is therefore authorized to profess and act with this belief.' Mr. Mallock shows that, on strictly agnostic principles, such language has no meaning whatever, for, according to these, the Unknown Power has not the remotest concern for what a man thinks and does, and that

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it is the author of all the bad that is in him as well as of all that is good. Mr. Spencer, again, has remarked that the wise man, when he fearlessly utters the highest truth, is 'playing his right part in the world,' and that, if he makes the truth prevail, 'it is well; if not, well also; though not so well.' His critic asks, 'How is it well? And with whom?' Such language can have any warrant only on the supposition that the universe is concerned with human happiness or welfare in some special way in which it is not concerned with human misery. 'Our devotion to truth will not benefit the universe; the only question is, will knowledge of the universe, beyond a certain point, benefit us?' But such a supposition 'imputes to the Unknowable design, purpose, and affection. In every way it is contrary to the first principles of agnosticism.' Agnosticism does, indeed, supply us with a religion; but it is a religion of the devil—the spirit that denies, for it takes away all real meaning from effort and duty, and teaches us that nobody is responsible for our actions but the unfathomable universe. As for being sorry for any shameful sins we may have committed, 'we may as well be

repentant about the structure of the solar system.’

This time, the effect on me of the reading of Mr. Mallock’s article on ‘Cowardly Agnosticism’ was simply electrical. As soon as I had finished it, I seized my hat and rushed out to allay my excitement. Duty! Duty! aye, that was the point. Agnosticism could not really explain the meaning of it, or provide us with any adequate sanction for its performance. Questions now came to my mind which had never occurred to me before. ‘Why live for others, and not for self? Why try to improve oneself at all? Why seek after truth? Why adopt the religion of humanity? Why do anything for posterity, seeing that posterity has done nothing for us? Why lead a noble and self-sacrificing life, instead of a selfish and indolent one? Why be a social reformer, and not leave things well alone?’ Mr. Mallock had shown me how utterly incompetent was agnosticism to answer why. It could not do so on its own principles. It denied that the Infinite unknowable Power had any moral relations with man, and declared that we had no right to attribute to it any moral qualities whatsoever.

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But whence, then, this mysterious feeling of 'oughtness' or moral obligation? Agnostics fully accepted the authority of this feeling; but, evidently, they could not really account for it. It was something beyond the ordinary canons of what they deemed logical proof. They were inconsistent with themselves when they began to argue about it. Even at the cost of tears I had made the search for truth a part of my religion; yet, did not Mr. Mallock conclusively show how unmeaning and irrational was this devotion to truth on strictly agnostic principles? There was unquestionably something wrong somewhere. Agnosticism could not represent the whole truth; it stood convicted of self-inconsistency and moral cowardice in not facing the full consequences of its own fundamental principles. I saw it all now; and then there suddenly sprang up in my breast a mighty hope. If agnosticism was wrong and palpably mistaken somewhere, then, God, perhaps, was not altogether unknowable. What about this mysterious, inexplicable voice of duty? Might not it have something to say with regard to the nature of the Infinite Power? My immediate thought, however, was con-

centrated on the obvious fact that agnosticism was mistaken ; agnosticism could not be true ; agnosticism was an intellectual failure.

I returned exultant from my walk with the full realization that another tremendous crisis had come to me. I knew not whither it was going to lead me ; but of this I was certain, that I had ceased to find either moral satisfaction or intellectual consistency in Agnostic Pantheism. As I had already given up real atheism and materialism, so I now abandoned agnosticism and the Religion of the Unknowable for ever.

CHAPTER IV

THE AUTHORITY OF CONSCIENCE

AND now I had an altogether new experience in my mental and religious development. For more than a year I did not know exactly where I stood. I could not call myself an orthodox Christian, nor an advanced Christian, nor an Atheist, nor even a religious Agnostic. I was simply groping after the truth. I could not go back to Hell-fire and the incredible miracles of orthodoxy with its dogma of Biblical infallibility. I could not return to the absurdity of crude Atheism and Materialism. I had now also parted company with the agnostic's religion of the Unknowable ; and as for Positivism, well, that was no real religion at all, but simply a noble aim in life. A broad and enlightened Christianity would, undoubtedly, have satisfied me ; but how was I to find it ? I had parted from it before on the score of the inconsistencies and perplexities of conscience.

The voice of conscience appeared to be like a general revelation of God to man ; but, as Professor Bain had pointed out, its dictates, after all, were of purely human origin, being but the outcome of our civilization and education, or, perhaps, being inherited from our more or less remote ancestors. Whenever I thought of conscience, I at once recalled the instance of the Turkish woman and her veil, which seemed to clinch the matter. And yet, conscience was directly and most intimately concerned with the performance of duty—the immovable rock on which the vessel of agnosticism had gone to pieces. It was quite evident, then, that the problem depended, in some way or other, on the question of conscience or duty. Was the voice of conscience human or divine? Ever since my teens I had regarded it as entirely of human origin, and, in no sense, a revelation of the Most High ; but now I was forced to reconsider the whole position, for Duty was the one fact which agnosticism seemed unable to explain. During fifteen months I grappled with this great problem.

I read again Herbert Spencer's 'Data of Ethics' ; but now, for the first time, realized

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how absurd and inadequate was his explanation of the imperativeness of duty. In the seventh chapter he tries to account for the element of coerciveness in the moral consciousness by the sense of fear arising from the association of the truly moral control with what he calls the political, religious, and social controls. The sense of coerciveness which arises from fear of the pains and penalties following infractions of law and custom 'becomes indirectly connected with the feelings distinguished as moral. For since the political, religious, and social restraining motives are mainly formed of represented future results, and since the moral restraining motive is mainly formed of represented future results, it happens that the representations, having much in common, and being often roused at the same time, the fear joined with three sets of them becomes, by association, joined with the fourth. Thinking of the extrinsic effects of a forbidden act excites a dread which continues present while the intrinsic effects of the act are thought of, and being thus linked with these intrinsic effects causes a vague sense of moral compulsion. Emerging as the moral motive does but slowly from

amid the political, religious, and social motives, it long participates in that consciousness of subordination to some external agency which is joined with them, and only as it becomes distinct and predominant does it lose this associated consciousness—only then does the feeling of obligation fade. This remark implies the tacit conclusion, which will be to most very startling, that the sense of duty or moral obligation is transitory, and will diminish as fast as moralization increases.'

Does not Herbert Spencer in this very extraordinary passage confound moral obligation with mere self-compulsion? Undoubtedly, the latter gradually disappears, as we become more and more moral, more and more habituated to right actions, and require less and less effort and struggle to perform them. But the former, the unique feeling of 'oughtness,' will surely increase and become more imperative than ever. Will it ever come about, even in an ideal world, that there will be no more feeling that duty ought always to be done? Absurd and impossible. In an ideal state of society, it is true that the effort of duty, the compelling oneself to do it, the temptation to

neglect it, will be reduced to a minimum ; but the obligation to do it, the conviction that it *ought* to be done will surely reach its maximum.

And, according to Spencer, the ultimate motive for the performance of duty, for doing the right entirely for its own sake, for living for the happiness and welfare of others, for ever seeking the highest ends of existence, is a kind of indirect fear of the State or society, or an anthropomorphic Deity we have ceased to believe in. In this view, then, the greatest social and moral reformers—those who have been most conscientious and sensitive to the appeals of duty—must have been the most cowardly and timid of all. To such an absurd contradiction does the great philosopher of agnosticism not hesitate to come, in his endeavour to explain the imperativeness of duty. Needless to say, I now entirely rejected such an utterly inadequate argument, and marvelled that I had ever accepted it before. I had only done so thoughtlessly, because, up to this time, the question of the ultimate sanction of duty had not, in any way, perplexed me. Now it had become the vital and all-absorbing problem of my life. I felt that, in spite of

the whole world, and in utter defiance of all mankind, past, present, and future, I must do my duty. I must seek the highest. I must do what was right. The only reasons why I did not, there and then, accept this feeling as an ultimate fact of consciousness, and so the direct utterance of the Most High, was that I was still unable to account for the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the current conception of conscience. Why did it dictate to mankind courses of conduct that were either contradictory or absurd? That Turkish woman again came up to mock all my efforts at a satisfactory explanation.

In the meantime, I received partial assistance from Baldwin's book on 'Elementary Psychology and Education.' In eagerly reading all that it said about conscience, I found that there was given a definition of it which cleared away some of my difficulties. Conscience was not a faculty that told us what was right and what was wrong—we had to find that out by the intellect—but it was the 'power to feel rightness.' Baldwin says 'Self, as intellect, finds out what is right. Self, as conscience, feels a strong impulse to do what he believes to be right. Steam impels

V | the boat, but the pilot guides. Conscience is the moral impulsion in man, but intellect guides. To call conscience a moral judgment or a moral sense or a moral guide, tends to hopeless confusion.'

So far, so good. Some of my difficulties seemed to be cleared away. Questions of slavery, polygamy, the self-immolation of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, and contradictory dictates on the subject of Sabbath observance were matters of intellect, then, not of conscience; and so varied from country to country and from age to age. The Turkish woman has a low degree of intelligence if she really thinks she is committing a heinous crime in not keeping her face veiled. But still, the moral impulsion is there. She fully believes that she is perfectly right in obeying the custom of her religion: she has the feeling of 'oughtness' all the same. Paul persecuted the Christians from conscientious reasons. As Baldwin says, 'The feeling "I ought" moved Paul to persecute. He believed it was right, and felt that he ought.' But why does conscience impel us to do things that are either absurd or wrong? All persecution for religious opinions is wrong,

however much Paul and others may have believed to the contrary. If conscience, then, is the authoritative utterance of the Most High, it follows that God himself impels us to do actions that are really wrong, and also, as in the case of the Mohammedan woman, very absurd. Though I pondered for months over the problem, there seemed to be no escape from such a dilemma. I was now convinced that there was something in conscience that was absolutely authoritative, something that rose infinitely above the changing opinions and beliefs of men—a mysterious imperative, which agnosticism utterly failed to account for, and which the greatest of agnostics had so unsatisfactorily tried to explain. But I could not extricate this really divine element from something that was also human, shifting, transitory, erroneous, and even morally wrong.

The authoritative nature of conscience impressed me more and more. I thought of the question of slavery. Here was a subject on which there had been a total diversity of human opinion. The ancients believed slavery to be perfectly right; until quite recently, many people in America held the same view, and even justified it from the

authority of the Bible. Yet, it is now acknowledged by all civilized mankind to be a hideous crime, and British men-of-war show no mercy to Arab slave-traders. Now, is slavery really wrong? Is there anything in it which contravenes a law, not human, but divine? Would it become right, if civilized humanity were to change its mind, and begin possessing slaves again to-morrow? Some of us feel that slavery ~~is~~ really wrong, and that not the universal consent of mankind could ever make it right. But if so, do we not, then, make our appeal to something higher than mankind, something that can defy mankind, something that is eternal and unchangeable? That something is the voice of the Most High in each of our hearts, a voice that cannot be only the echo of that of men, since it actually challenges the opinions and beliefs of the majority of men, a voice that must be truly divine and issue directly from that Infinite Power, about whom agnostics so confidently declare that nothing can possibly be known.

And I, in my eager groping, was drawing nearer and nearer to that Supreme Power. I began to feel that he really did speak to us in our very highest thoughts and aspirations,

and that he could not be indifferent to our actions. I remember waking one morning in Victoria with the thought that the relation between the Infinite Power and ourselves must be of the closest possible kind. It was just a year since the morning on which I had re-read Mr. Mallock's essay on 'Cowardly Agnosticism'; and, though still beset by difficulties and perplexities, I had made steady progress in my search for God. 'I would not make my judgment blind.' I would not desert reason, and accept anything that was irrational or self-contradictory. Sir John Lubbock, now Lord Avebury, in his book on 'The Pleasures of Life' has one pregnant sentence which did much to keep and direct me in the right way. It is: 'The first duty of religion is to form the highest possible conception of God.' That thought has, indeed, been my pole-star ever since, and its guidance has never failed me, even in the most trying and perplexing of religious problems. A religion in which reason and authority were at variance, or in which the truth had been vouchsafed but to a limited portion of mankind, was not the highest that we could conceive. I could not attribute any imperfection to the Most High; and yet,

until I had cleared away the difficulties in connexion with conscience, I could not frankly and finally accept its utterances as the real voice of God.

At this time also, I felt in hearty sympathy with those paragraphs on 'The Problem of Individual Life' which Henry George has put at the end of his famous book 'Progress and Poverty.' They are an eloquent plea for personal immortality. But I could still have only a vague and indefinite hope in the matter. I might even begin to think that such a future for us was not only possible, but even extremely probable. It all depended on the Infinite Power of the universe; and I had not yet come to believe in him as a God of goodness and love. Agnosticism still had its hold on me, though with ever-weakening force; and there always lay before me the frowning problem of conscience and duty.

CHAPTER V

‘THE TRULY MORAL CONTROL’

IN August, 1892, I became schoolmaster at East Sooke, which is separated by an inlet of the sea from my former district of Sooke in the extreme south of Vancouver Island. It was in this beautiful spot that my long pilgrimage was to come to an end. My father, who was about half-way round the world from me, in the island of Cyprus, materially contributed to that consummation. I had kept him informed as to my religious progress. He realized the full significance of my escape from materialism, and naturally rejoiced in it with all his heart. He had sent to me in British Columbia two little books by an anonymous author—‘If the Gospel narratives are mythical, what then?’ and ‘But how if the Gospels are historic? An Apology for believing in Christianity.’ I am not aware that the former affected my views in any way; but

I well remember how I felt after carefully perusing the latter.

In my perplexities and difficulties, I had taken the book up a second time. The argument for the miracles of Christ did not appeal to me ; but I was most forcibly struck by the entrancing moral ideal set forth in its pages. On a Saturday in September I pondered over the matter ; and there arose in my mind this vital question—If man can exhibit such a lovely picture of virtue and moral excellence as this ; if he can rise to such a lofty ideal of character and conduct as the anonymous author has depicted for us in his little book, can the infinite Power himself be inferior in beauty and goodness to his own creatures ? Whether Jesus himself actually reached this exalted ideal, or whether the author had been drawing on his own imagination, was altogether beside the point. Here was the portrait of an ideal itself, existing in this book ; how had it come there ? Whence had Jesus Christ, or, if you like, the author of the book, derived it ? It could not have come out of nothing. What can be the ultimate source of all our ideals of goodness, love, and truth, but the infinite and eternal Power from which all things

proceed? God must be infinitely higher than the highest that is in his creatures. But if we refuse to acknowledge that, amidst all his unknowable qualities, he, at least, possesses the attributes of truth, and love, and goodness—attributes perfectly consistent with his infinity—we are, in reality, degrading him beneath ourselves. Surely, he *must* know us, and care about us.

I felt this so keenly during the watches of that night, that, next morning, I prayed to God for the first time in seven years. I was convinced that the Infinite and Almighty Father of all must, and would, hear me. I prayed that he would clear away my difficulties and let me see the light. My intellectual difficulty about prayer itself had gone the previous winter. One evening, when the family with whom I boarded were singing hymns, I realized that the line of one hymn, ‘Bind, O Lord, my heart to thee,’ was indeed a prayer which carried its own answer with it in the earnestness of the asking. True prayer was communion with God, not the asking for material benefits. But spiritual blessings were quite different; it could never be out of place to ask for them, and their answer would be in proportion to

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the sincerity and eagerness of the petition.

It was one thing, however, to solve the intellectual difficulties connected with prayer, and quite another to believe that the Infinite Power of the universe actually heard our prayers, and himself helped us in our need. It was only an overwhelming sense of the absolute perfection of God and his infinite superiority over ourselves that wrung from me my first petition from that eternal omnipresent Power whom I had learned to acknowledge and adore. It was still only a cry in the dark to the unknown God ; but it was a cry that came from the very depths of my being. And that cry was answered.

The sincerity of my prayer implied the earnestness of my endeavour to find out the truth. I redoubled my efforts to solve the apparent contradictions of conscience, and I no longer rested till it was done. I had really got the problem narrowed down to this one point—how to disentangle the really divine element in conscience from the human elements which were mixed up with it. If I could only discover the way to do this, and so could give a definition of conscience which should be absolutely free from all contradiction, inconsistency, and absurdity, my task

would be accomplished. I should, then, have proved that the voice of conscience was an ultimate fact of our consciousness, which was caused in us directly by the Infinite Power, to whose nature it would bear unimpeachable testimony.

How could Paul do wrong from really conscientious motives? How could the Turkish woman veil her face so unnecessarily at the direct bidding of the Most High? In my reflections I contrasted the conduct of the Mohammedan with that of an English lady taking a basket of provisions to a very poor and sick neighbour. According to Professor Bain's and the current view, conscience was operative in either case. Both women acted conscientiously; but every one would admit that there was an extraordinary difference in the nature of their conduct. The whole world would approve of the action of the English lady; only Mohammedans would endorse the conduct of the Turkish one. The deed of the former we all instinctively feel to be right and good; that of the latter has nothing praiseworthy in it, except to followers of Mohammed, and cannot be said to be intrinsically good and morally right. The

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voice of the Most High might well have inspired the former; it was only long-established custom and the command of Mohammed that influenced the latter. Though both cases claimed to be instances of conscience, I could not but see that there was some vital and fundamental distinction between them. Now, in what did that distinction really consist?

I turned once more to the seventh chapter of Herbert Spencer's 'Data of Ethics,' and more carefully than ever read those paragraphs which deal with the moral consciousness in man. For the sake of those who cannot lay their hands on Spencer's book, as well as to adequately and satisfactorily explain how, at last, I managed to extricate myself from the perplexities of the current opinion about conscience, I must here refer to some passages in that seventh chapter. I have already quoted, and shown the futility of, Spencer's explanation of the element of coerciveness in the moral faculty. Not an indirect fear of the State or society, but an ultimate feeling—the mysterious promptings of the Most High—can alone account for the feeling of 'oughtness' or moral obligation, which is the source of all

our noblest actions and endeavours. We have now to see what really constitutes the moral faculty itself.

In his treatment of the subject, Herbert Spencer points out that 'the conscious relinquishment of immediate and special good, while it is a cardinal trait of the self-restraint called moral, is also a cardinal trait of self-restraints other than those called moral.' These he names the political, religious, and social controls; and he derives their origin, which is prior to that of the moral control, from fear of the visible ruler or the State, of the invisible ruler or the Deity, and of society at large. All these four kinds of internal control have the common character that the simpler feelings are overruled by the more complex, and 'though, at first, they are practically coextensive and undistinguished, yet, in the course of social evolution, they differentiate, and eventually the moral control with its accompanying conceptions and sentiments, emerges as independent.' The three lower controls, though so much resembling the truly moral control, are only preparatory to it—'are controls within which the moral control evolves.' The command of the political

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ruler is at first obeyed, not because of its perceived rectitude, but simply because it is his command, which there will be a penalty for disobeying. And so with the other two controls: obedience to God and acceptance of the world's authority are the motives really at work, and not any essential wrongdoing or impropriety in the acts themselves.

Herbert Spencer then comes to the real difference between 'restraints properly distinguished as moral' and 'those other restraints out of which they evolve and with which they are long confounded.' It is that the former 'refer not to extrinsic effects of actions but to their intrinsic effects.' The truly moral deterrent from murder is not hanging, or hell-fire, or social disgrace, but the thought of 'the death-agony of the victim, the destruction of all his possibilities of happiness, the entailed sufferings to his belongings.' Conversely, the truly moral incentive to succour for the distressed, or for social reform, is not a reward, here or hereafter, but the idea of the relief, happiness, and welfare to be bestowed on the individual or the race. 'Throughout, then, the moral motive differs from the motives it is associated with in this, that, instead

of being constituted by representations of incidental, collateral, non-necessary consequences of acts, it is constituted by representations of consequences which the acts naturally produce.’

I saw it now. The English lady’s philanthropy was a case of the truly moral control. Its rightness depended on the natural and intrinsic effects of her conduct—the happiness and welfare which her poor neighbour would receive from her gift. But the Turkish lady’s veiling her face had no intrinsic consequences worth speaking of: the supposed rightness of her conduct arose from ‘the representation of incidental, collateral, non-necessary consequences’ of her act—the reprobation of her co-religionists and fear of the wrath of Allah. The former was a truly moral deed, right in itself apart from law and public opinion: the latter arose solely from obedience to custom and dread of divine vengeance. The bestowal of benefit on the needy comes from the promptings of the moral control; the veiling of the face before a stranger is an apt instance of the mere social and religious controls. Paul, indeed, felt it his duty to persecute the followers of Jesus; but what was the origin

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of his feeling? He had no regard to the natural and intrinsic consequences of his conduct: he was moved solely by considerations of what was expedient for the safety of the Jewish faith, and of the supposed desires of the God of Judaism, whom he wished to serve. Not the truly moral control, but the political, religious, and social controls governed his actions, and led him to commit deeds of cruelty and oppression.

The truth at last flashed upon my mind. Conscience, real conscience—the voice of the divine—is the moral control only: the other controls are inferior and preparatory to it and ought to have a name of their own. For the sake of clear thinking, I had to invent one for myself, and ventured to call them collectively ‘subconscience.’ All the hitherto baffling and confusing perplexities in the matter had arisen simply from mixing up all four controls in one conception and including under the notion of true conscience cases that really belonged to subconsciousness. The justification of slavery, polygamy, rigid Sabbath observance, and religious persecution, all belonged to the latter class. My difficulties with regard to them had gone for ever.

I felt a deep debt of gratitude to the great Philosopher of Evolution for the invaluable help he had given me in his ‘Data of Ethics,’ for without his luminous exposition of the four controls included in the current idea of conscience, I should never have been able to surmount my difficulties.

I could now add what was wanting in Joseph Baldwin’s definition of conscience: True conscience is not the impulse to do what we believe to be right; but the impulse to do what is right because it is *in itself* right. The former—what I call subconscience—seems to be as imperative as true conscience, for it provides the necessary social conditions in which true conscience can evolve, and we must all learn to obey man before we are qualified to obey God; but it often impels us to do what is really wrong, so that it cannot be the voice of the Most High. On the other hand, true conscience can never possibly go astray. It impels us to do what is in itself right, and, therefore, it has nothing to do with the varying opinions and authority of men. Yet, its authority is supreme over all. It can come to us directly only from that Infinite Power who is above all, and through all, and in all.

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CHAPTER VI

THE LIGHT AT LAST

AND now I was all but at the end of my long pilgrimage. I could already discern the summit of the mountain up which I had been toiling ever since that memorable evening, when I had first dared to think for myself. With the final removal of my perplexities with regard to the meaning of conscience, I knew that the last great obstacle had been overcome.

The distinction between true conscience and subconsciousness—pardon me for employing the new term—was the key to the whole problem. It had been put into my hands by no less an authority than the great Philosopher of Evolution himself. But where he also tried to account for the imperative-ness of duty by an extraordinary makeshift which is the basest calumny on all the saints, heroes, and martyrs of the race, I had to dissociate myself altogether from his view.

I had to accept the only self-consistent and satisfactory account of the matter, namely, that the unique feeling of 'oughtness' or moral obligation in the case of what was in itself right to do, was an ultimate fact of the consciousness, utterly beyond mediate proof. Even agnostic reasoning and logical evidence must, in the last resort, depend on certain ultimate propositions which cannot be deduced from anything else. Our belief in the reality of the external world rests on one of these ; no one can prove it. To this I would also add three others—our capability of putting forth effort as we choose ; the principle of causation or the uniformity of nature, which is the basis of all scientific evidence ; and the truly moral imperative, or the injunction to do *what is in itself right*, in opposition, if need be, to all the rest of mankind. As this ultimate feeling of rightness is often opposed to the sentiments and authority of humanity, as, for instance, in the case of the first human being who felt that slavery was a crime, or that arbitration was better than war, it cannot possibly derive its sanction and authority from humanity. It is the inferior controls, political, religious, and social, that do that ;

but the truly moral control—real conscience—can only derive its sanction and authority from a Power higher than man. Since it speaks in the same way to the best and noblest of all men, and would be as binding and operative in the star Sirius, if we could be transported there, that Power can be no other than the infinite life and energy of the universe. True conscience is the voice of the highest : it is a veritable revelation from God himself.

As I saw the way clear and my difficulties gradually solved, my excitement became intense. Every spare moment from my school duties was given to reflection and meditation on the all-engrossing subject. I now recognized the very voice of the Most High ; but what was the meaning of the message ? Agnosticism declared that it was quite impossible for our limited mental faculties to ever know the Infinite inscrutable Power ; and yet, here were communications coming to men from that very Power which was supposed to be so utterly unknowable by us. Agnosticism could give no adequate or satisfactory explanation of these communications. Herbert Spencer had, indeed, tried to do so ; and would have us believe

that their authority was nothing but the quakings of fear for the punishments or censures of men. So, Huxley must have bravely championed the cause of Agnosticism because he was secretly afraid of either the bishops or their opponents. At any rate, he must have been at heart a coward, for, according to the great Philosopher of Agnosticism himself, the moral obligation to fight for the truth arises from nothing but a kind of indirect fear. On the other hand, the great philosopher had also helped me to see that the command to battle for the truth, in defiance of the whole world, did not come from men at all, but from the infinite Power himself. There was no absurdity or self-contradiction in this; but the simple harmonious truth. True conscience, then, is the command of the infinite Power of the universe, and, like every other command or message, it must give some indication of the nature of its author or source.

I now asked myself what was it that true conscience really demands of us: what were the commands of the Most High to all the children of men? I finally came to the conclusion that the truly moral imperative required from us three, and only three,

things—to seek for truth, to be loving, and to do good. These three suffice, for they correspond to the three divisions of the mind—intellect, feelings, and will. The supreme aim of the intellect is truth ; of the feelings love ; and of the will goodness. Everything that is right in itself will, I think, be found to come under one or other of these three heads. They are the primary divisions of duty. The impulse to pursue them is, as we have seen, an ultimate fact of consciousness, which is incapable of mediate proof. They are, thus, directly authorized in each one of us by that infinite Power in whom we live, and move, and have our being. They are confessedly as binding on agnostics as on Christians, on Buddhists as on Mohammedans, on atheists as on Mormons. Their authority is absolutely universal and unchallenged, for no sane individual will dare to say that we ought to neglect the truth, and to hate, and hurt, our fellow-men. All religions declare that we must do the opposite ; and materialist and agnostic, in this at least, heartily support them. This universal effect can only have a universal cause ; and the universal cause can only be that universal Power who speaks to all men alike.

And what can we gather from this universal message to mankind? However inscrutable otherwise the infinite Power may be, must he not at least be infinite truth, infinite love, and infinite goodness? For how can an infinite Power that directly authorizes us to seek for truth be other than infinite truth? How can an infinite Power that directly authorizes us to love as much as possible, be other than infinite love? How can an infinite Power that directly authorizes us to do all the good we can, be other than infinite goodness?

By the end of October, 1892, I had got on so well with the removal of my religious difficulties, that I began to commit my thoughts to paper. There was nothing to prevent my immediate acceptance of the fact, that the infinite Power of the universe was infinite truth; and, from the supreme authority of true conscience, the conclusion was equally plain that he was also infinite love. But, with regard to infinite goodness, there had arisen in my mind a serious hitch. I could not, at first, reconcile the doctrine of a Providence with the invariability of natural law. Goodness, indeed, must be something real; and it was not the same

thing as truth or love. But, in a world of universal law, where was there room for the providence or goodness of God to act? Nevertheless, I could not set at naught the third supreme command of true conscience—Do all the good that you can to your fellow-creatures. It is common enough for men to preach what they do not practise; but to attribute such an inconsistency to the infinite Power of the universe was irrational and absurd.

God's goodness *must be active*; and the difficulty with regard to invariable law can be overcome in this way—Providence is never partial or limited, a good promoted here, or an evil averted there: it is universal and general. The universe is one harmonious whole, in which all the laws of nature are invariably working together for good. In the infinite goodness of God, these universal laws, which, science itself declares, have produced our beautiful world from a mere fire-mist or nebula, must be the best possible methods of his will; hence, they are unchangeable, and can never be disobeyed with impunity. In this universal providence we, as individuals, have also our share. It is only our own folly and ignorance that

conceal the fact from us, as well as the great delusion of our age, that temporary happiness, and not perfection of character, is the real end of our existence.

In East Sooke, I was concerned mainly with the indubitable deduction from the voice of true conscience, that God must be good. But I hesitated, at first, to accept it. I now firmly believed in his infinite truth and love; and yet, I was not altogether satisfied. There was something else of infinite importance still lacking. Who would care for a God who was conscious of us, and even loved us; but who was impotent or unwilling to help us, and could not do us an atom of material good? What were these laws of nature that seemed to thwart the infinite goodness of God? Were they not the very methods of God himself, by which he performed his sovereign will? They had no existence whatever apart from him; and could not, therefore, oppose, but must rather promote, his goodness.

I was earnestly considering this question, when, at length, the light burst upon me in its full glory. I was just approaching the summit of the mountain of God-search. Only a few more steps, and I should be at

the very top. I rushed eagerly forward ; and oh ! happiness and bliss beyond compare. I reached the crown and consummation of all my weary years of mental toil and conflict. I had long sought for God, and I found him at last.

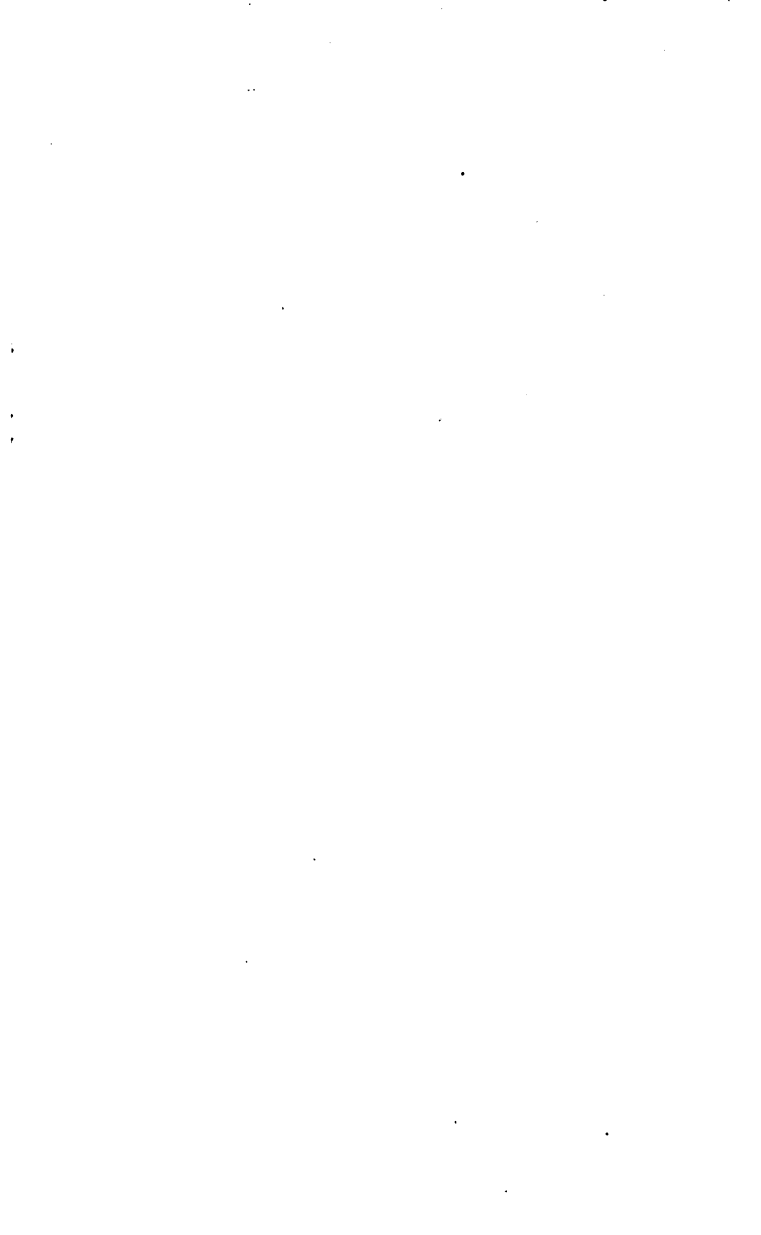
Here The supreme event of my life had come. On the morning of November 10th, 1892, I awoke about seven o'clock at Mr. G—'s farm in East Sooke. My thoughts at once reverted to the one subject that was then engrossing almost all my attention. I was reflecting on God and this perplexing question of his goodness. Then it came upon me suddenly, with irresistible force, that all my past life was one long argument for his goodness to me. I already believed thoroughly that he was infinite truth and infinite love ; and why was I hesitating about his infinite goodness ?

Had God not given me my friend John R— to start me off thinking for myself ? Had he not directed my steps straight to the sensational school of philosophers, that I might the sooner be reduced to helpless ignorance and impotence, the better prepared for the sure and enduring foundation which was to follow ? Had he not made me lose

my life in atheism, that I might save it for ever in a glorious faith which nothing in the world could shatter? And, when I was resigned to my fate, had he not brought me across the Atlantic Ocean, and right over the Rocky Mountains, to learn the sublime truth in such an isolated spot as the backwoods of Vancouver Island? Had he not, on the way, put the very books into my hands that were to help me solve all my difficulties? Had he not been with me in Winnipeg, and Victoria, and San Francisco, directing my steps to the right book-stores? Had he not, at the very moment when I was going to openly proclaim myself an atheist, suddenly turned me into the paths of a reverent and religious agnosticism? Had he not, at the time when I was just ready for it, led me to see that agnosticism could not represent the real truth? Had he not put it into my father's heart to send me a little book which was to give me the final impulse in my quest for him? And, last of all, had he not enabled me to solve the bewildering difficulties about the meaning of conscience, and revealed himself in its supreme authoritative behests to follow love, goodness and truth?

Had God not done all this for me? Providence or Chance, which was it? There was no other alternative. Chance was but another name for our own ignorance. Science declared that in a universe of invariable law there could be no such thing as Chance. Which was it, then, that had led me, in that truly wonderful way, from my childhood's simple beliefs, right through Atheism and Agnosticism, to my present glorious faith in the infinite truth and love of God? Could it really be Chance? Could Chance have directed all my experiences to this utterly unexpected, yet most desirable, end? Could Chance have led me from positive Atheism to the most absolute faith in God? Could Chance have cleared all my difficulties out of the way, and, in the most distant places, provided the very means for that purpose? To attribute my conversion to mere Chance is an impossible, an unthinkable proposition.

Then, it was God himself who, in this truly marvellous manner, had brought back his wandering child to the shelter of his own ineffable goodness and love.





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